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Encounters with Kusama: disability, feminism, and the mediated Mad art of #InfiniteKusama

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ABSTRACT

The 2018 exhibition “Infinity Mirrors” at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, and the accompanying social media phenomenon #InfiniteKusama, harnessed the myth of the “mad genius” who “overcame” hardship in its celebration of the life and work of artist Yayoi Kusama, yet veered away from a nuanced engagement with disability, madness/mental illness, and access. Desiring a crip version of the artist and psychiatric user/survivor, we take up Marta Zarzycka and Domitilla Olivieri’s call to mobilize the feminist potential of affective encounters in digital spaces, generating an analysis of our mediated interactions with Kusama’s persona and artwork at the cultural sites of the art gallery, Instagram, and Twitter. While the physical and digital extensions of the exhibition tried to elicit participation in normative and normalizing ways, critically crip moments of productive tension ruptured the smooth lines of power and ideology in the institution. Through a series of personal reflections we showcase the potential for “affective encounters” between bodies in spaces to disrupt ableist and sanist norms.

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Introduction: Kusama in Wonderland

Throughout the run of the blockbuster exhibition “Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors” at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto from February to May 2018, the museum’s signage and social media channels invited audience members to put ourselves in the scene. We were encouraged to digitally photograph our experiences and share them online making the most of the extremely short (20 second) time-frames allotted for visiting Yayoi Kusama’s famous mirrored rooms. The latest additions to the vast body of posts tagged #InfiniteKusama, which at the time of writing (October 2019) numbered 85, 679 on Instagram alone, were displayed en masse in a cascading digital display situated by the show’s exit, and became a steady source of promotional material for the AGO’s social media accounts. Intimately conjoining visitor experience with the celebrity artist’s persona, the museum tweeted out a series of user-generated images together with text captions directly quoting the artist reflecting on her philosophy and practice of art. An April 29th Twitter post featured two women in dotted dresses, the first peering into the interior chamber of one of several towering pink-polka dotted spheres, the other taking her companion’s photograph. [Figure 1] The image was



Figure 1. Through the Looking Glass (Twitter post by @agotoronto, April 29 2019). Accessible image description: This is an Art Gallery of Ontario Twitter picture of Yayoi Kusama’s 2009 room “Dots Obsession—Love Transformed into Dots.” The room is pink and filled with large pink spheres covered in black polka dots. In this image, a woman in a polka dot dress peers into one pink sphere while another woman takes her photograph. The caption to the image reads: “Like Alice, who went through the looking-glass, I, Kusama (who have lived for years in my famous, specially built room entirely covered by mirrors), have opened up a world of fantasy and freedom. You too can join my adventurous dance of life.”

prefaced by an allusion to Alice in Wonderland drawn from Kusama's autobiography: "Like Alice, who went through the looking-glass, I, Kusama (who have lived for years in my famous, specially built room entirely covered by mirrors), have opened up a world of fantasy and freedom. You too can join my adventurous dance of life."¹ Visitors, it is suggested, are drawn into a magical space of relational encounters, a wonderful convergence facilitated by *mise-en-scène* and technology. But an emphasis on "fantasy and freedom" belies the disorientation, pain, and violence accompanying Alice's and Kusama's tumbles into the psychic underneath, while also making the subjectivities of visitor-participants themselves (ourselves) vanish, subsumed into a mystical "dance of life." Noticing cracks in the joyful fantasy of artist-audience-gallery union, in this essay we engage both in documenting our own experiences of interacting with, photographing, and studying the exhibition, and in wondering, critically, about how the bodyminds of "Infinity Mirrors" and of mediated art more generally might be imagined differently.

Desiring a messier, madder version of Kusama, we turn to Marta Zarzycka and Domitilla Olivieri's "Affective Encounters: Tools of Interruption for Activist Media Practices." Zarzycka and Olivieri ask: "How do cultural, artistic, and media practices participate in the distribution of affects and feelings? How, as media participants, can we use these affects and feelings in strategies of persistence, resistance, or subversion?" (2017, 527). Responding to this call to take seriously and playfully the feminist potential of affective encounters in digital spaces, we attend to the nuances of crip feminist identity in the mediated Mad art of Kusama, concentrating on "Infinity Mirrors," its web extensions, and the contradictory affects of excitement, joy, frustration, and discontent to which it gave rise. Kusama is a troubling feminist figure and an evasive larger-than-life celebrity, and is not explicitly attached to critical Mad and disability discourse. In this paper we offer a Mad/crip account of Kusama's exhibition, "decomposing" the idea of the mad genius and/or the hysterical/frigid woman and moving the story more emphatically into the realm of "crip creativity" (Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer 2014, 127) and "cripping the museum" (Sarah Brophy and Janice Hladki 2014). While the physical and digital extensions of the exhibition tried to elicit participation in normative and normalizing ways, critically crip moments of productive tension ruptured the smooth lines of power and ideology in the institution. Through a series of personal reflections we showcase the potential for "affective encounters" between bodies in both virtual and material spaces to disrupt ableist and sanist norms.

We want to illuminate the threads of pain that run through this research project: psychic pain, physical pain; the pain that is performed and practiced through Yayoi Kusama's art; the pain that is mirrored or transformed through the shifting lenses of social media and selfie culture. We want to explore what it means to live and work in a body in pain and to work *with* a body of work that emerges around pain. Where is that pain located in the encounters with screen technology, art galleries, and social media? Kusama writes that "Artists do not usually express their own psychological complexes directly, but I do use my complexes and fears as subjects.[...] I make them and make them and keep on making them, until I bury myself in the process. I call this 'obliteration'" (Yayoi Kusama 2011, 47). What if, rather than "obliterate" pain, we brushed the dirt from its buried body and allowed it to speak? What might it say?

We bring a crip feminist embodied lens to mediated encounters and digital spaces in order to attend to the bodies at the margins of feminist scholarship, and to elicit the

creative possibilities of Mad and disabled approaches to new media. Turning away from the traditional hierarchical and singular-voiced traditional models of academic composition, we instead turn toward feminist counter-traditions of scholarship and personal writing. Sharing Moya Bailey's interest in "a non-hierarchical circular collaboration" or a "horizontal relationship" (2015, 23), our multi-voiced text draws attention to the labouring bodies in digital scholarship and research as the process rather than product. This piece is co-written by two feminist scholars: Adan is a Mad/crip/queer graduate student, creative writer, and casual bookstagrammer. Sarah is a professor, mother, daughter, spouse, friend, sister, and mentor. We perform all of these roles with/through shifting degrees of chronic pain, fatigue, and anxiety. As we move into the moments of encounter with Kusama, we make visible our different positionalities, experiences, and perspectives as we employ personal writing in tandem with theoretical discourse. Personal writing has been used as a feminist tool by scholars including Ann Cvetkovich (2012) in *Depression: A Public Feeling* and Sara Ahmed (2017) in *Living a Feminist Life*. Through this entwining of perspectives we hope to both embody the spirit of crip feminist interdependent scholarship, and to offer multiple frameworks through which to interrogate mediated art, madness, and identity. Following Alison Kafer's reflections on mobilizing pronouns differently, in order "to trouble the very notion of 'obvious' identifications as well as the disabled/able-bodied and disabled/nondisabled binaries" (Alison Kafer 2013, 19), the grammatical subjects and objects of our sentences encompass the first person plural (we/us), in both the specific (we two writers) and the general sense (to draw other scholars into our propositions and imperatives) alongside the third person plural (they/them). However, we do not dispense with the first person singular (I/me).

Crip feminist encounters in digital spaces are *ethical* encounters that consider the safety and privacy of all subjects involved. Following the example laid out in the edited collection *Good Data* (eds. Angela Daly, Monique Mann and S. Kate Devitt 2019), we are invested in performing digital research in an ethical and responsible manner. Andrea Zeffiro's (2019) critical contribution to this collection examines the academic study of social media and calls for:

a dialogue between interdisciplinary researchers to better understand some of the key concerns pertaining to the integration of social media data into a range of scholarly projects, and engage with pressing questions as to how access to and use of social media data is mandated and governed. (217)

This paper is our contribution to this ongoing dialogue in feminist media scholarship. Our research methodology is also guided by Dorothy Kim (2014) critique of academic digital surveillance as well as Bailey's (2015) insights into accountability and consent in the digital humanities. Thinking with these feminist scholars about consent, surveillance, and safety, we protect the anonymity of Twitter and Instagram users and engage with social media posts with care and respect. For that reason, social media posts reproduced in this article include public-facing images (e.g., from the AGO's social media feeds, advertising campaign, web interface) together with site visit images and social media posts created by us the authors. It is integral to our autoethnographic and ethical methodology that the site visit images consist of our own self-portraits and perspectives and are careful to safeguard the anonymity of fellow visitors.

When we perform affect analysis on a corpus of tweets using the hashtag #InfiniteKusama (which we collected through the data-scraping tool Postman and Twitter APIs), we look at trends rather than individual posts. While lamentably it's not feasible to obtain individual consent from every person using the hashtag, we can protect individual users from being identified and surveilled. To that end, these tweets will not be shared in part or in whole, account names will be anonymized, and the content of tweets will be paraphrased. Please note that the dataset has been saved on a password protected PC in order to protect sensitive metadata.

Troubling the "Mad Genius" Through Intersections of Race, Gender, and Disability

Yayoi Kusama's decision in the mid-70s to enter the Tokyo psychiatric institution where she continues to reside is well known, and she has frequently been called the "patron saint of mental illness and the arts" (Claudette Abrams qtd in Murray Whyte 2018). Yet, her story of madness is at odds with the "Critical Madness, driven by revolutionary consciousness" (Ben Watson 2000, 113) of Mad Pride and Mad Studies, which are characterized by their sharp critiques of psychiatric violence and the normative/normalizing prescriptions of sanism and ableism (Brenda A. Lefrançois, Robert Menzies and Geoffrey Reaume 2013; Ted Curtis, Robert Dellar, Esther Leslie, and Ben Watson 2000). Despite her willingness to link her life and art to their roots in "hardship" and "the pain of feeling cornered and trapped" (Kusama 2011, 212), Kusama's focus in interviews tends to romantically conflate madness and creativity: a transcendent philosophy of "love and peace and spirituality" born out of what is described as an incessant, inborn desire to paint, from dawn to dusk, largely in isolation (qtd in Melissa Chiu 2017, 168). Kusama has attached her public persona to that of Vincent van Gogh, brushing up against the myth of the "mad genius": "In spite of whatever illness he may have had, van Gogh's art overflows with humanity, tenacious beauty, and the search for truth" (2011, 211). Furthermore, Kusama's celebrity persona embodies the ableist and capitalist myth of "overcoming," that is, "transcending, disavowing, conquering" (Eli Clare 2017, 9) mental illness, racism, sexism, poverty, and immigration, becoming, against the odds, a celebrity artist and "rival" to Andy Warhol (Kusama 2011, 182–3): "For an aspiring artist like myself, to triumph over an unjust environment is to triumph over the pain of feeling cornered and trapped" (212). Meanwhile, references to Kusama's mental illness were largely effaced from "Infinity Mirrors" (Philip Kennicott 2017; Murray Whyte 2018). Such acts of omission are attributed to the artist's control over the show's framing as well as a curatorial inclination to favour the "phenomenological" over the "filter" of the "personal" (Mika Yoshitake qtd in Whyte 2018).

Our counter-reading of "Infinity Mirrors" differs from accounts of Kusama's work that emphasize transcendence by attending to the embodiment and labour of both artist and audience. As Danielle Wong has established in her important study of virtuality, health and wellness, and Asian North American identity performances online and onstage, a long and ongoing history of techno-Orientalism has scripted Asian embodiments as hypermodern exemplars of the virtual that are also lacking: deemed excessive, mechanized, and incomplete (2017, 15). Certainly, Kusama's work has had to contend with Orientalist stereotypes that reduce Japanese femininity to the small, demure, mystical, exotic, and artificial (Nadine Lefortier qtd in Gwendolyn Audrey Foster 2010, 271–2). Yet, concentrating on the "virtuality" of Asian identity performances also brings into view "the oppositional strategies of occupying such tropes" that ambivalently make space for alternative

cyborgian forms of selfhood and solidarity (Wong 2017, 16). We find Wong's theorization of virtuality's resistant potential resonant with feminist interpretations of Kusama that emphasize self-authorship. Interpreting Kusama together with other female experimentalists of her generation, particularly Yoko Ono and Mariko Mori, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster argues that:

Kusama drags the viewer into participation with her artwork and herself; and in so doing, she confronts the viewer with her Japanese identity and her female identity and her star artist identity. [...] Her challenges to the spectator disrupt the binaries of West vs. East, male vs. female, and more philosophical ideas such as nudity as freedom and repetition as an act of self denial/and self fulfillment. (2010, 273)

Like Ono and Mori, suggests Foster, Kusama's multidisciplinary, multimediated artwork is distinguished by amplitude, re-appropriation, and the insistence of its address to viewers (2010, 275). In this way, Kusama's bold bodily and mental self-inscriptions in and across her mirrored rooms, public happenings, performance, film, paintings, and sculpture can be interpreted as exploding limited definitions of Japanese womanhood and artistry from within and making space for audience participation as a potential mode of solidarity.

In this paper, we are interested in reading for the material embodied traces of pain, tension, resistance, and emotional disability that run through Kusama's work and life. Behind the myth of Kusama is a labouring bodymind: the labour of managing unruliness and distress through psychiatry and medication and long periods of rest (Kusama 2011, 205); of struggling with the very matter of selfhood, as in the autobiographical *Commemoration Photo Shoot* (1995) where she images herself as fractured and displaced into a group of 14 polka-dot-faced women (Kusama 2011, 205); of performing a consumable "mad genius" identity as an Asian woman working in a field that privileges able-bodiedness, whiteness, and masculinity; and "of taking a limit and turning it into the very thing that makes her work undeniably unique and powerful" (Foster 2010, 272). Underneath the glittering larger-than-life photograph of Kusama that watches us as we move through the labyrinthine gallery is the sweaty, more complicated, harder-to-articulate labour of a disabled Japanese woman seeking to make her mark and gain cultural authority in the art world across several geopolitical contexts (Japanese, American, global) that have never been especially welcoming to women, disabled bodies, or people of colour.

"The Spell of the Polka Dot Net"²

The exhibition was visually symbolized by the polka dot, a recurring pattern in Kusama's work. The dot was picked up by news outlets in their coverage of the show: Kusama was heralded as the "Queen of Polka Dots" by the *New York Times* (Motoko Rich 2017), *Flare* advised readers on "11 Spot-On Polka Dot Pieces to Wear to the Yayoi Kusama Exhibit" (Erinn Stewart 2018), and the AGO hosted a series of "Family Sundays, April: Polka Dot Fun" (2018) during the exhibition. We noticed the dot reproducing exponentially across the AGO and spilling out over the City of Toronto, across subway stations, buses, bus stops, and shop windows. Polka-dotted food, giftware, clothing, nails. The proliferation of polka dots across the physical locale of Toronto and the virtual galleries of Instagram and

Twitter highlights the virality of the exhibit and its relationship to social media's emphasis on sharing, liking, and trending.

Such happy associations with family, fashion, and fun mask the fraught relationship between Kusama's dots and institutions of power. In the 1960s, Kusama staged public happenings during which she painted nude bodies with polka dots: a revolutionary gesture. In 2018, spiralling out from the centre of cultural authority, the dot takes on a less disruptive function: advertising. Meanwhile, inside the AGO the dot was used to police and monitor through a series of signs. With white lettering on red, these large dots visually imitate the stop sign, and are marked with instructions: "Don't touch," "No photos in this room," "Leave bags and loose clothing outside the room." [Figure 2] The most interactive installation, "The Obliteration Room," invited viewers to participate in the act of creation by posting polka dot stickers around the white space. This, too, was shaped by a set of rules and surveyed by a security guard: "Don't affix the sticker to your own body," "Don't jump or climb on furniture to reach higher on the walls." As the security guard watches us, we think about the damage of surveillance and policing, the damage that white supremacy commits against bodies of colour, the damage that sanist/ableist culture commits against Mad and cripp bodies.

The virality of the dot spreading through the city and the halls of the AGO is mirrored by the movement of the artwork from physical to digital platforms. "Infinity Mirrors" focused on the media artefact and mediated process of the selfie, a genre that has been identified as a potential site of agency for, among others, disabled users and women of colour (Derek Conrad Murray 2015). However, like all media, selfies are not inherently liberatory, and the coaxed selfies of the exhibition became entangled with free labour, advertising, and normative bodyminds. The exhibition was built for normative bodies, and in the 20 seconds we are given to take a selfie on a small, narrow platform in a mirror room, I can physically feel the way the exhibition is curating my photography. Later, scrolling through hundreds of selfies from the exhibit, they appear uncannily similar. The coordinated sameness of the #InfiniteKusama selfies demonstrates an erasure or eradication of difference in the exhibition. Yet moments of resistance slipped through the polka-dotted net of institutional control: in some of the #InfiniteKusama selfies we discovered evidence of rule-breakers who *did* place the stickers on their own bodies, mapping out the limits of this control. The circulation of these acts of resistance online alongside the images of "good" patrons who followed the rules and took exhibition-approved photos shows us the critical potential of mediated affective encounters, their capacity to generate momentary disruptions of the myth of the "mad genius" and of techno-Orientalist spectacle.

Points of Encounter I: Viewing Bodies & The Gallery as Cultural Authority

Adan: L4 Spinal Segment³

Las Vegas meets Vatican City as the traditional space of the museum slips into other cultural spaces: the amusement park, the fun house, the theatre. Over the course of three hours, Sarah and I see a range of Kusama's work arranged chronologically. Although this is the traditional way in which galleries display an artist's life's work, I feel disappointed. The Mad woman's life is being straightened out into a linear narrative of progress. It has been

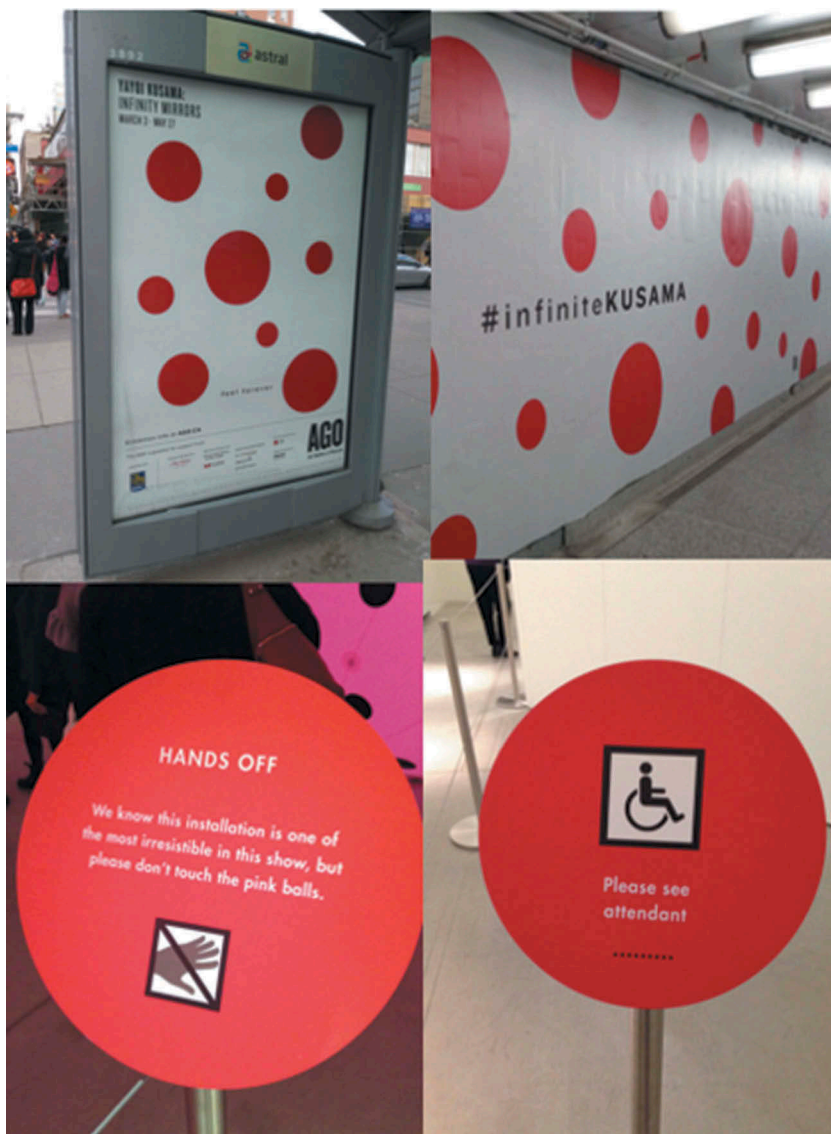


Figure 2. Polka Dots (author photos). Accessible image description: this collage of four photographs shows the use of the polka dot as a shorthand for the Infinity Mirrors 2018 exhibit. The top right image shows an advertisement for the exhibit at the St. Patrick subway station. The advertisement features a white wall covered in red polka dots. In the centre of the wall, the words “#Infinite kusama” are spelled out in black. The top left image shows an advertisement at a bus station near the Art Gallery of Ontario. Again, the advertisement is white with red polka dots and features the same hashtag. The bottom left image shows one of the signs in the exhibit. A red circle reads “HANDS OFF. We know this installation is one of the most irresistible in this show, but please don’t touch the pink balls.” Below the text is an image of a hand in a white square with a black line crossing it out. The bottom right image shows another red polka dot sign. This dot features a stick figure in a wheelchair, and the text reads “Please see attendant.”

organized and cleaned up, when I wanted to see a neurodivergent artscape. I am reminded of Tobin Siebers's *Disability Aesthetics* (2010), in which he argues that "Works of art called ugly ignite public furor. Unaesthetic designs or dilapidated buildings are viewed as eyesores. Deformed bodies appear as public nuisances" (72). Kusama's work may inscribe a Mad Japanese femininity, but the exhibit embodies a sane and able-bodied aesthetic.

I feel out of place.

We wait 20 minutes standing in line for a 20-second viewing of an installation. I'm able-bodied this week, although pain creeps up as the day progresses, and after two hours of standing I spot a lone black couch and take a seat. My feet and back are aching by the end of the day. In line, I notice many elderly folks. I see parents with babies or toddlers strapped to their chests. Lines snake their way through expansive gallery rooms with no places for bodies to rest. I find myself standing with the ghosts of all those bodies who could not attend, who were pushed out by the architecture and the signage, "not only because the political unconscious exerts a stranglehold on the kinds of bodies acceptable in the built environment but because modern architectural theories define the form and function of buildings with explicit reference to the politics of the body" (Siebers 2010, 72).

Among the many red polka-dot signs that punctuate the space are several that feature the "universal" symbol of disability: wheelchair user. Putting aside for a moment the continued failure of a wheelchair symbol to encompass the range and nuance of disability (making it very difficult for many bodies to get their access needs met), these information dots reproduce the accommodation model in which the disabled body is an exception and requires exceptional action. Looking for more information, Sarah and I ask a docent about accessibility. She insists that the exhibition is fully accessible—citing elevators—and tells us that an employee will take a person in a wheelchair "and their handler" into the rooms "a different way." We both cringed at the word "handler," which dehumanizes relations of necessary care and support.

"The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away" had "flashing lights," which would have been better identified as strobing. Since strobe lights can trigger epilepsy, and many other people have sensitivities to strong lighting, this exhibit would have been much more accessible without it.

This space was not made for us.

Sarah: Waiting (Feet)

En route to "Infinity Mirrors," I readied myself for the immersion by taking a picture of my fuchsia and black polka dot socks, against the backdrop of a green polka-dot covered GO train seat. [Figure 3] And I wasn't the only visitor who dressed for the occasion. What this odd ankle-selfie anticipated, though, was how this joint would be affected over the course of the day, not only by my commute into Toronto from Hamilton but by the standing and waiting within the exhibition itself, admittedly in a pair of boots with heels that my physiotherapist might have suggested were unwise, but which showed my socks to advantage.

The anecdote of my ankle—in its mounting pain, a material locus of overexcitement and overextension—brings my own travelling body, at least a part of it, into the encounter with Kusama's art. It also attunes me to other peripatetic patterns, both within and around the exhibition, and in *Infinity Net*, Kusama's published

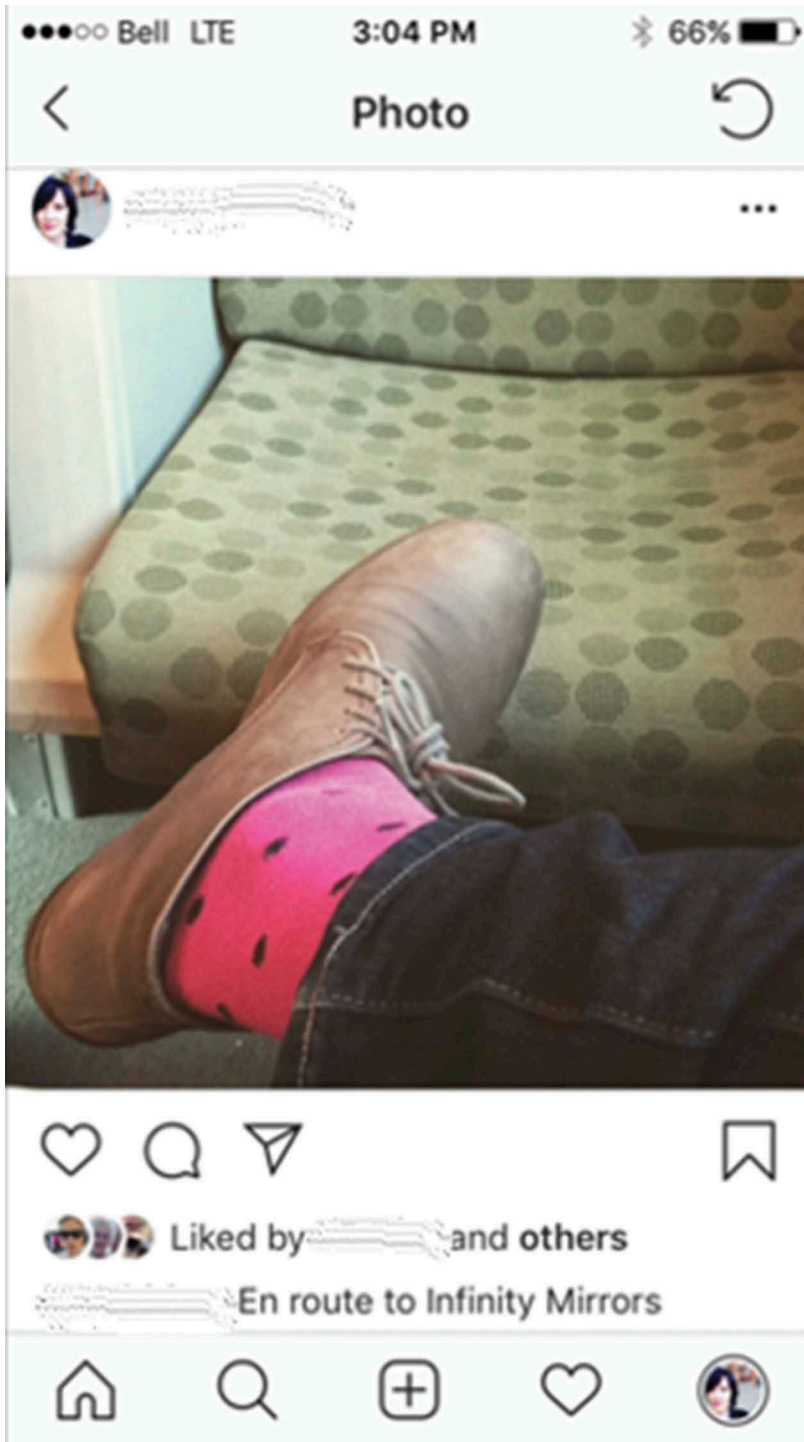


Figure 3. Infinity Socks (author Instagram post). Accessible image description: Sarah shows off pink socks with black polka dots in an Instagram post. The caption reads “En route to Infinity Mirrors.” The image features a tan shoe, a hot pink sock covered in black polka dots, and the cuff of a pair of dark jeans. The green seat on the public transit train also features polka dots.

autobiography. While the exhibition had us lining up against the backdrop of a chronological sequence, and occasionally tripping over the threshold to enter and quickly exit the mirrored rooms, the structure of *Infinity Net* is recursive, starting 2001, looping back to her arrival and early years in New York City, before circling back to childhood and then forward again into the 60s/70s, and back to the present (90s/early 2000s). Bare feet in public art space are/were part of an iconography of freedom and struggle in Kusama's earlier work, though, something more chaotic and ruptural. Of the 1965 launch of the "Phalli's Field" mirrored chamber, Kusama had imagined that "People could walk barefoot through the phallus meadow, becoming one with the work and experiencing their own figures and movements as part of the sculpture. 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" (Kusama 2011, 51). Such an offering to others is an extension of Kusama's own therapeutic process: "It was a kind of self-therapy, to which I gave the name 'Psychosomatic Art'" (42).

For the artist, the compact between negative and positive space is not always felicitous sublimation, but involves remaking the world and art through acts of "vandalism" (Siebers 2010, 98) that tear apart, fragment, deface. And thus the vision of liberation and empowerment through self-immolation isn't only about cultural entrepreneurship, for Kusama, it's also intertwined with a distinctively "crip creativity" (Johnson and McRuer 2014, 127). There is bodily effort in this account of her own labour, an effort that is sometimes figured as more or other than human: "By the power of my spirit and my single-hearted pursuit of the path, I have clawed my way through the labyrinthine confusion of the world of people in an unstinting effort to approach even one step closer to the realm of the soul" (Kusama 2011, 211). And, as a migrating body who remembers being defined as a "both a gifted child and a bad girl, burdened with layer upon layer of problems" (70), Kusama associates her own feet with an overwhelming desire to destroy her art, as in her reflections on her early years trying to make it in NYC: "But reality was the hard crust of bread on my table, the torn stuffed dog on my couch. And the 'white nets' that led me all the way to the mental institution—what good were they doing me? Any number of times I thought of putting my foot right through those canvases" (21). This desire brings Kusama into close contact with Sara Ahmed's "willful subjects," those "Feminist killjoys: willful women, unwilling to get along, unwilling to preserve an idea of happiness" (2014, 2). My growing impatience with the exhibition as the pain travelled up my right side from foot to hip to neck finds resonance with Kusama's frustration, with the eruption of bodily will, and possible rupture of the art world's demands on maker and viewer alike.

Points of Encounter II: Digital Faces/Facing the Digital

Adan: L5 Spinal Segment

[Figure 4] Digitization is an embodied process.

I'm scanning articles about Kusama using an app I downloaded onto my iPad called Genius Scan. To keep the page flat I'm using two books and my toque—the tools I had on hand. Fortunately the fluorescent lighting is bright: at home I've had difficulty avoiding



Figure 4. Infinite Labour. Adan poses in “Obliteration Room” at a desk and fake computer. The room, table, chair, and computer are all white, and beginning to be covered in polka dots of many colours. Adan sits at the computer, hands poised over the keys, awkwardly smiling for the camera.

shadows on the page. I’m struck by the comedy of a grad student fussing over each page, carefully arranging each book-weight to stay out of the frame of the photo, trying to keep the pages as flat as possible, learning the curve of the cover, the tightness of the spine. These physical tactics to prepare the book for digitization change with each text—they each require a slightly different balance, a different touch. My back gets sore leaning over the desk with my iPad and I take a few breaks to stretch. If I don’t monitor my chronic pain, I might be using my faithful cane next week.

An effective research assistant should become invisible, the trace of their hands on the page erased. We are not supposed to leave fingerprints. But behind the gleaming chrome data project is always the sweaty body of the menial labourer, and when I come face to face with Kusama, I notice the different forms of labour we perform as Mad/crip bodies.

Her: performing mental illness in a way that is consumable and shareable, surviving, trying to slip through the snares of sexism and racism and accusations of narcissism to assemble some kind of untouchable mad god-celebrity.

Me: cutting and pasting, documenting, taking screen-caps, sorting through tweets and Instagram posts manually, sorting through the tweets we collected with Postman, looking for Instagram links and images; reading until my vision is blurry; restarting the computer because it has frozen again—there's too much data for the browser to manage and it keeps crashing. Restarting. Too many medical appointments to keep track of.

She is a Japanese woman surrounded by polka dots. I am a white trans person surrounded by library books. She is vividly, spectacularly mad. I am quietly, invisibly Mad and disabled. My face is reflected in the computer screen, sometimes overlaid on top of her portrait that appears in every article and every advertisement for the exhibit. My face is always disappearing behind spectacle and celebrity.

Between us are the impediments of time and distance, the screen and the page. Between us rest the shared secrets of gendered embodiments that survive and exist with and through medicalization and psychiatric intervention. I can never touch her, but sometimes we are proximate. Sometimes our bodies intersect. The project of Mad-making is something we have in common, of claiming knowledge over our own experiences, of defiantly turning away from shame (even as it lingers under our ribcage, in tight breaths and furtive heartbeats). We stake a claim on the gaze and ownership over our own bodies in the midst of a patriarchal society; art scene; academy. I imagine her shame at being institutionalized, obliterated by polka dots overrunning the city outside the window in the psych ward while she was trapped inside (voluntary is only a pretty word). When one review described her as “Not mental patient but artist—and an indisputably great one” (qtd in Kusama 2011, 224), did she read the words triumphantly, having subsumed the gendered and racialized stigma of “mentally ill” with the pride of “artist”? Or did she turn away from the reviewer who failed to understand her work as both an homage to her madness and a survival tactic? Mad or artist: why can't we be both?

If she could look back at me, would she see the madness in my body? Would we recognize each other? In claiming Kusama, we perform a queer assemblage of madness that locates affect in the spaces between, in the mediated moments between researcher and icon on the screen. The shared labour of identity construction, of navigating the fraught and powerful markers of “mental illness” and “artist” or “academic,” the shared labour of brushstrokes and keystrokes. Labouring bodies in pain.

Sarah: Waiting (Shoulders)

It took several attempts for me to succeed in acquiring our two tickets for “Infinity Mirrors,” and the first time I made it through the digital line-ups of tens of thousands to the booking stage a malfunction of the site, or perhaps my own tired, distracted fumbling and juggling at the keyboard as I had my attention drawn towards other responsibilities as a professor and mother, meant I had to start the process all over again. I took screen caps during these attempts, and Adan made them into a collage. [Figure 5]

My quickened heart rate during these sessions bespoke anxiety, tension, and impatience more than excitement. Holding still in place at my monitor, I felt the frustration building in my shoulders, neck, and lungs. As on the pressured thresholds of the mirrored

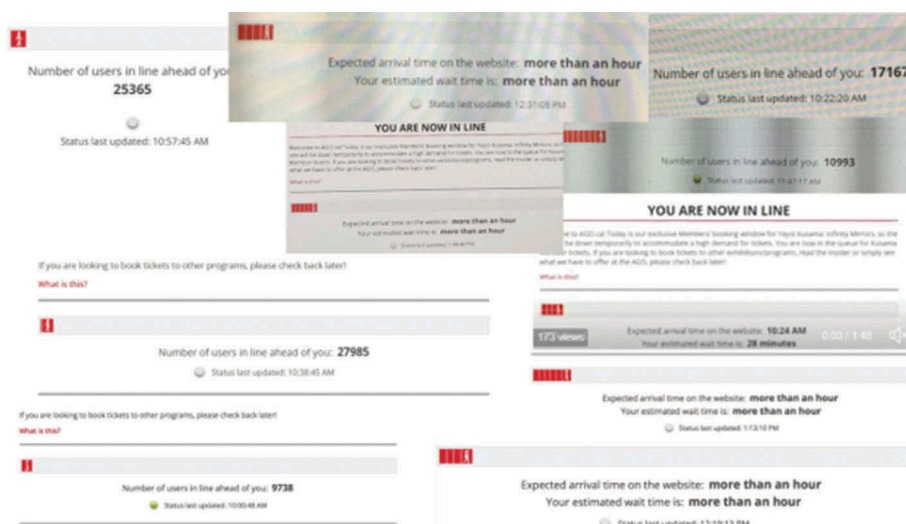


Figure 5. Wait Screen Collage (authors' composition). Accessible image description: this collage includes a series of screen caps from wait times trying to buy tickets to the exhibit online. Each image displays a loading bar with a white cartoon person in a red box at one end. As the user moves up the online queue, the bar fills with red rectangles. Text reads: "Number of Users in line ahead of you," "estimated arrival time on the website" and "your estimated wait time is." Queues depicted here range from 9738 to 27,985 users, with wait times ranging from 28 minutes to "more than an hour."

rooms themselves and in the rush lines at the museum's entrance, the online ticketing queue demanded endurance but also in certain moments speed, the normative timing of bodyminds able to wait, concentrate, and move quickly. Progress through the long online wait was marked by a walking figure (white, on a red bar, as shown above), inscribing a narrative of able-bodied stamina and overcoming.

Social media showed me that I was far from alone in feeling the tension and exhaustion of persisting in the digital waiting room. We followed the use of #InfiniteKusama from the start of promotion and ticketing for the Toronto show in December 2017 to the end of the run in May 2018. Based on the quantity of data available (see Adan's comments above on browser failure and computer glitches), we decided to isolate a smaller, more manageable dataset for analysis. We studied 495 tweets posted primarily on two specific dates: December 12, when tickets went on sale for members, and January 16, when tickets went on sale for the general public. In line with our methodology of ethical encountering, we looked for affective patterns rather than surveilling or "outing" specific users. We analyzed the dataset using the program Voyant, which provides quantitative information about the frequency of word occurrences in a text, and then applied close-reading to assign affects to specific word clusters. Time-based words such as "hours," "wait," "minutes," and "long" and words signaling distress including "anxious" and "stressful" jostled for attention with the vocabulary of happy excitement expressed by terms like "happy," "blessed," and "lucky." The emojis used by prospective visitors, from crying faces, rolling eyes, hearts, and open-mouth smiley faces, encompassed a range of affects. Frustration, boredom, and the anxiety of waiting (accompanied by the insecurity of not being

guaranteed a ticket) were entangled with celebration—the bliss or at least relief of finally scoring tickets.

As the show commenced in February 2018, we continued to observe a litany of online complaints about the inaccessibility of “Infinity Mirrors.” We manually documented the AGO’s Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook feeds and made note of these critiques. Reading for disruptions to the smooth neoliberal narrative of audience ecstasy, we make visible the critical interventions of AGO audiences online without violating their privacy. In the process, we learned that the gallery remained to a significant degree impervious to addressing access barriers over the run of the show. On the AGO Twitter feed, a visitor was celebrated for attending despite back pain, and the AGO retweeted a post about an elderly attendee struggling with the line (ignoring the implicit critique and instead asking how their grandchild enjoyed the exhibit). On CBC radio, the gallery’s CEO demurred when asked about the reasons for the startlingly short time allotment and discouragement of lingering in the mirrored rooms, first emphasizing the imperative of efficiently managing “huge demand” but then recasting the constraint as a part of the show’s “magical” feeling (Matt Galloway 2018). Questions Adan and I asked staff about alternative access (e.g., provision of chairs for the rush queues) were met by the instruction to self-accommodate. Despite an ice storm on April 14, the AGO continued to require attendees to line up outside in freezing rain and high winds, a decision many social media users criticized.

Whatever the exhibit’s motivations for avoiding references to Kusama’s ongoing history of mental distress, it is notable, as Murray Whyte observes, that the museums that hosted the show tended not to engage in accessibility and outreach work. The disability and Mad arts community in Toronto had been vocally eager for outreach, but was disappointed. As Claudette Abrams, director of the Mad poetry centre Workman Arts, commented, “We had hoped for maybe a ‘First Thursday’ gig: something prominent, to engage the community. But it didn’t happen and, frankly, I was a little heartbroken” (qtd in Whyte 2018). Despite the ways in which Kusama’s multi-platform, participatory art practice can be read as struggling against the constraints of Orientalism, misogyny, ableism, and sanism, we are concerned that when mass attendance and user engagement are conflated with the democratization of art, disabled and Mad “access is actually curtailed in the name of a seemingly all-inclusive and harmonious public” (Robert McRuer 2018, 215–16). Loving Kusama’s art, disabled and Mad audiences participated: we lined up, did our best to scurry through, noticed tension and pain, stumbled over the threshold, searched for a chair, posted our selfies and polka dot stickers. But we also chafed against the limits of inclusion, and now continue to wait, impatiently, for transformative change in how audience bodyminds and our own and others’ access needs are imagined and met. Haunting our movement through the exhibition were the ghosts of all those bodyminds who were barred from attending.

Coda: Mad/Crip Feminist Digital Practice

The inaccessibility of “Infinity Mirrors” at the AGO was perhaps surprising in the wake of the artist jes sachs’s intervention in 2017, called “To Be Frank,” in a critical reference to the physical and attitudinal limits of the elaborate entryway and spiral staircases designed by architect Frank Gehry in 2004–08. Although the AGO now features sachs’s performance on its website in a gesture appearing to acknowledge these issues, the barriers we

encountered in acquiring tickets, visiting the exhibition, and studying the show suggest that the problem endures. Our research demonstrates that access in twenty-first-century art institutions mounting interactive blockbuster exhibitions is complex, encompassing intertwined digital, social, and physical infrastructures in urgent need of crip remaking.

Kafer writes that “spaces get imagined differently in different futures; creating accessible futures requires attention to space, both metaphorical and material” (2013, 20). In the project of making accessible feminist technologies, artwork, spaces, discourse, and futures, we encourage researchers to turn from mediation to Mad mediation, and from embodiment to crip feminist embodiment. There are, of course, excellent projects that are in alliance with our approach, including Elizabeth Ellcessor’s 2016 *Restricted Access*, which explores the inaccessibility of interfaces and tech communities for disabled users, Rachel Reinke and Anastasia Todd’s 2014 work on “Crippling YouTube” 2014, a 2019 “In Focus” section of the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* on “Crippling Cinema and Media Studies” (McRuer, ed.), and a 2019 special issue of *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* on “crip technoscience” (Fritsch, Hamraie, Mills, and Serlin, eds. 2019). In the related field of feminist video game studies, Adan guest edited a 2018 special issue of *First Person Scholar* entitled “Mad/Crip Games and Play,” which featured five articles by Mad/crip feminists on disability, gender, and sexuality in games and gaming communities. While we are excited by these developments, we also want to call for the digital humanities as a field to move disability, understood as intersecting with racial, gender, and class oppressions, from the isolation of a special issue or a niche topic panel and into every issue and scholarly presentation. In order to ensure an accessible and inclusive future, the feminist digital humanities needs to take up Dorothy Kim’s provocative question in *Bodies of Information*: “What if the mainstream angle was the angle of disability studies?” (2018, 247). In our own Mad/crip/feminist encounters with Kusama’s “Infinity Mirrors,” we have tried to keep faith with this question by centring disabled bodyminds, their insights, needs, and demands, in order to foster a critical and ethical discussion of the interconnections between digital mediation, un-cripped art institutions, and ongoing struggles for access.

Notes

1. This phrasing was originally devised as part of the advertising for Kusama’s 1968 Body Paint Happenings in New York City (*Infinity Net* 124).
2. Kusama, *Infinity Net* 24.
3. I live with chronic low back pain that is intermittently disabling, sometimes limiting my mobility and requiring the use of a cane for walking. My chiropractor (one of many health professionals I have been shuttled between over the past 13 years) tells me the problem is my L4 and L5 spinal segments.

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