



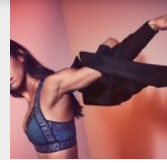
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Yayoi Kusama Brings Her Decalcomania to Philip Johnson's Iconic Glass House in Connecticut



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by LAIRD BORRELLI-PERSSON

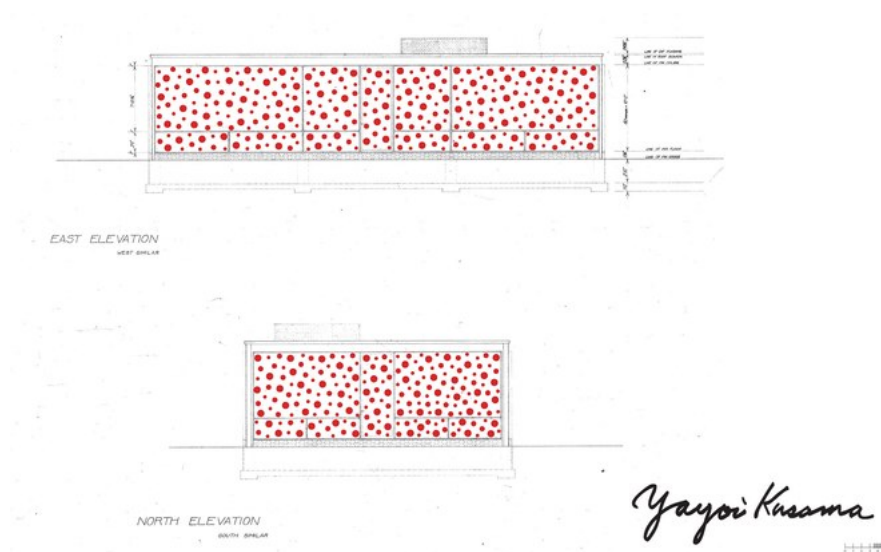


A drive through New Canaan, Connecticut, a verdant and prosperous New England enclave with its own train stop, inevitably evokes a Norman Rockwell scene. But as chroniclers of East Coast suburbia like John Cheever and *Ice Storm* author Rick Moody have documented, surfaces can be deceiving.

Still, after passing by one of those rambling stone walls and walking down a pine-lined drive at 877 Ponus Ridge Road, it always comes as a surprise to discover Philip Johnson's Glass House, that famous exemplar of International Style. The purity and simplicity of this box, designed when the "architect's architect" was under the influence of modernist Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, is set upon the land almost as a cup might be placed over a spider. Though the structure does more than capture elusive nature—what Johnson referred to as "the most beautiful wallpaper in the world"—its transparency creates a union with it as well. "Instead of a house, I saw, the summer day I visited," wrote Ninette Lyon in a 1965 issue of *Vogue*, "only air, transparency, freedom. The glass walls seem invisible: You think you can reach out and touch the trees."

Built in 1949, the Glass House now sits, among 14 other structures, on 49 acres of

land. Johnson, who described it as his “50-year diary,” used the property as a sort of salon and theater. In the years that followed, he hosted benefits and performances to foster the relationship between art and architecture. “It’s perhaps an oversimplification to say so, but so-called ‘modern architecture’ is really the first architectural movement in history to derive from painting,” he told *Vogue* in 1964. “Usually it’s the other way around—baroque architecture bred baroque painting, but, oversimplification or not, modern architecture derives from Cubism.” In 1986, Johnson donated the property and its buildings to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In 2007, following the deaths of Johnson and his partner, David Whitney, the estate was opened to the public.



kusama



To celebrate its 10th season (the house is open from May to November), and the 110th anniversary of Johnson’s birth, curator and collections manager Irene Shum invited 87-year-old Yayoi Kusama, the Japanese multidisciplinary artist, to exhibit in New Canaan, which has resulted in three installations. In May, Kusama’s steel and Pepsi-red *Pumpkin* (2015) was placed near the Glass House’s circular pool, on the footing that once supported an Ellsworth Kelly sculpture. In the newly dredged pond—an artificial one added by Johnson in 1957—Kusama re-created *Narcissus Garden*, one of her most famous works, first shown at the Venice Biennale in 1966. The *Narcissus Garden* in New Canaan consists of 1,300 floating and wind-blown steel spheres that reflect their lush and aqueous surroundings.

“I am deeply interested in trying to understand the relationships between people, society, and nature,” wrote Kusama in her 2011 autobiography, *Infinity Net*, “and my work is forged from accumulations of these frictions.” Born in Japan in 1929, Kusama moved to the States and became a major figure in the art scene of the 1960s with work she has described as obsessional. The artist, who suffers from “severe neuroses,” uses art to make sense of her world. Being and nothingness (what she calls obliteration) are central themes of her art, expressed by use of reflection, accumulation, and repetition. Kusama’s signature motif is the cheery,

Pop-y polka dot. “I wanted to examine the single dot that was my own life. One polka dot: a single particle among billions,” she has written.

Now Kusama’s dots will decorate Johnson’s iconic house for three weeks. The house, whose geometry is interrupted by a column was, explains communications director Christa Carr, the architect’s attempt, to find a “balance between the circle and the square.” Dots obsession can be seen as a celebratory continuation of that quest. The connection between nature and art is another point of connection between Johnson and Kusama. “My polka dots connect [the] inside and outside of the transparent glass house,” the artist told Vogue.com. “Once you are inside, the reflections of the glass expands my polka dots infinitely. The red dotted glass house harmonizes with the mirrored pumpkin and the *Narcissus Garden* spheres and the nature.”

Kusama’s studio installed 1,208 double-sided non-adhesive vinyl polka dots (they cling through static) in three sizes (12, 18, and 21 centimeters) in the space of two days. The finishing touches were made on the third day, and that night there was a party thrown in the artist’s honor, which featured a performance by Ryuichi Sakamoto (who was responsible for connecting Shum to Kusama) and Carsten Nicolai aka Alva Noto. “When I was offered to perform at the *Glass House*,” Sakamoto says, “the first idea that came to my mind was to use the house itself as a musical instrument.” The two musicians had no discussions prior to the event, he explains. “It was completely musical and 100 percent improvising, and that’s what we usually do,” he explains. “Looking at the very beautiful landscape through the glass wall with Kusama’s dots was something, and it affected me, affected us, I should say, a lot. It’s a strange mixture of natural, nature, and artificial things, art.”

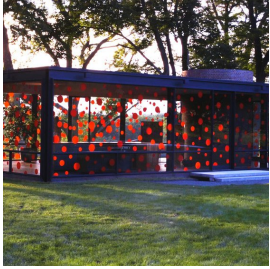
Like *Narcissus Garden*, *Dots Obsession—Alive*, *Seeking for Eternal Hope* is an animated artwork that will change not only with the light, but also with the seasons. “Human beings including you and I are part of nature,” Kusama writes from Japan. “Sky, sea, trees, flowers, stars, universe . . . I love them all. The art that I, who is part of the nature, create naturally is related to nature.” In this case, it also relates, sublimely, to architecture.

Special thanks to the Glass House, National Trust for Historic Preservation and Ota Fine Art + David Zwirner 2016

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