And Another Thing: Nonanthropocentrism and Art
Katherine Behar, Emmy Mikelson

Published by Punctum Books

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76501
I. Contexts
At the heart of speculative realism (SR) and object-oriented ontology (OOO) is the notion of a flat ontology. Manuel DeLanda defines a flat ontology as “one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status.” Within the context of SR and OOO, these “singular individuals” are human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate. The very notion of a flat ontology is spatial in its conception. It provides a spatial metaphor for a dense and complicated field of both interaction and isolation, where things (read as human and nonhuman) are at moments drawn in relation to one another, and at moments withdrawn and discrete.

When we speculate about the nature of a flat ontology, we are approaching space, a dark expansive space that is unhinged from clear hierarchical codes and laws. It is a space without a center, without a sovereign surveyor, and without clear boundaries. In a discussion of Georges Bataille, Anthony Vidler remarks on the “abilities of space itself to dissolve boundaries, as, that is, transgressive by nature, breaking the boundaries of all conventions, social or physical.” He continues by marking this space as “a bad object—abject and ignoble in its ubiquity, endlessly invading the protected realms of society and civilization with the disruptive forces of nature.” It is this kind of spatial dimension in which a flat ontology unfolds.

In Norman Bryson’s discussion of vision and visuality in “The Gaze in the Expanded Field,” he elaborates on the work of Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, who, building upon the principles of his teacher Kitarō Nishida, develops a theory that radically decenters the subject within the field of visuality: “The direction of thought that passes from Nishida to Nishitani undertakes a much more thoroughgoing displacement of the subject in the field of vision, which finds expression in a term so far largely neglected in the Western discussion of visuality, sūnyatā, translated as ‘blankness,’ ‘emptiness,’ or ‘nihilism.’” This theory moves beyond Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Lacan into a field of “radical impermanence” in which there is no clear and stable line of sight between the seer and the seen. Nishitani dismantles the privileged framing device that generates the safe distance between the subject and object and collapses them into the field of sūnyatā:

Passing on to the field of sūnyatā the object is found to exist, not at the other end of tunnel vision, but in the total field of the universal remainder. The object opens out omnidirectionally on to the universal surround, against which it defines itself negatively and diacritically. The viewer who looks out at the object sees only one angle of the global field where the object resides, one single tangent of the 360 degrees of the circle, and of the 360 degrees in all directions of the radiating sphere of light spreading out from the object into the global envelopment.

Through opening vision to an expansive dimensional space that accounts for a multitude of possible vantage points, the position of the subject is no longer singular and privileged. The boundaries between the subject and the object dissolve into a space in which sight lines are multiplied ad infinitum and everything exists within the lateral monumentality of vision. There is now a “dark or unmarked remainder that extends beyond the edge of peripheral vision into the space that wraps its way round behind the spectator’s head and behind the eyes.” It is this spatial engulfment expanding “omnidirectionally” that marks a move away from a traditional vertical ontology into one that spreads and sprawls, engendering an equivocal net in which all things shift in relation to one another.

Nishitani undercuts the anthropocentric position through an establishment of vision in the round, a vision in which a view of an object is only a “tangent” among a multitude of other possible views. An object cannot be fully knowable through a single view; it is more complex than even the sum of these views. Or perhaps, to borrow terms from object-oriented philosopher Graham Harman, the object is unique and withdrawn and irreducible.

An object is therefore established as an errant thing that cannot be reduced to a single view that marks the totality of the thing’s being. This single view or “tangent” only provides one possible glimpse...
of a thing. To further this point, I want to borrow from Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception. Although this correlationist theory may seem like an unlikely place to cull from, his discussion of aspects reinforces the ways in which the seer always perceives only a slice of the seen, and therefore the act of seeing always misses the thing in sight—the thing itself resides in a blind spot. It is discrete and out of reach and never fully constituted by the viewing gaze.

Wittgenstein’s extensive discussion of aspect perception entails the paradoxical condition of seeing something as changed while the thing itself remains unchanged. In his well-known example of this phenomenon, the duck-rabbit picture puzzle, one views the drawing of a rabbit head with ears in one instance or a duck head with a bill in another instance. Wittgenstein describes this event: “I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience ‘noticing an aspect’.” Additionally, he begins this discussion with identifying these two “objects” of sight:

The one: ‘What do you see there?’—‘I see this’ (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: ‘I see a likeness between these two faces’—let the man I tell this to be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself.

In the latter instance, he draws attention to the relation of resemblance within the act of seeing. While elaborating on the notion of seeing, Severin Schroeder concludes that “the extent to which ‘to see’ is a verb of epistemic success, every seeing involves identification of kinds of objects or appearances, which means seeing them as similar to others of that kind.” The act of seeing pulls objects into a visual field of meaningful relations, or resemblances. Similarly, as Bryson points out, this field is preestablished and not defined by an authorial subject:

When I learn to speak, I am inserted into systems of discourse that were there before I was, and will remain after I am gone. Similarly when I learn to see socially, that is, when I begin to articulate my retinal experience with the codes of recognition that come to me from my social milieu(s), I am inserted into systems of visual discourse that saw the world before I did, and will go on seeing after I see no longer.

This awareness of a preestablished “visual discourse” provides a further undercut to the foundations of the subject’s centrality. This highlights the condition in which things are not only viewed but also recognized. The aspect or tangent that is recognized is one of use-value or relevancy. This is how things become objects in the field of vision. In this regard what we “see” are objects; these are the shifting aspeclual details and tangents surrounding things. Seeing something as a thing, as opposed to as an object, would largely be a matter of seeing it as outside of a certain set of relevant factors. An object is seen as such precisely because we recognize how it works for us, while contrarily “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us” (emphasis added). The aspeclual perception of seeing-as is akin to Heidegger’s ready-at-hand tool analysis insomuch that “everything we perceive, we perceive in its relevant aspects: in a picture we immediately see what it represents and respond to it accordingly, just as we always see artifacts as what they are for us, what roles they play in our lives.” Objects are seen as varying sets of use-values within an anthropocentric structure; objects are seen as ready-at-hand tools.

The seer/seen dynamic need not only relate to human/nonhuman relations; the relation can be reversed or exclude the human altogether. One natural analogy of this is evidenced in the phenomenon of mimicry. Early twentieth-century sociologist Roger Caillois’s influential essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” offers a benchmark examination of the dissolution of self within space. He explores mimicry as a pathological condition of confusing one’s self with one’s environment and begins by discussing various forms of insect mimicry, such as “when the Smerinthus ocellata, which like all hawk moths conceals its hind wings when at rest, is in danger, it exposes them abruptly with their two large blue ‘eyes’ on a red background, giving the aggressor a sudden fright.”

The moth flashes an aspect causing it to be seen as something else. But this change in perception does not change the thing that it is, any more than mistakenly recognizing someone as someone else changes who that person is. The thing remains as aspects change. Mimicry therefore causes a flattening in the figure/ground relationship, much as is the case in sūnyatā for Nishitani, where “the centralized subject falls apart; its boundary dissolves, together with the consoling boundary of the object.” What one finds in Caillois and Nishitani is the description of space that has the ability to consume and transform the generally accepted stable distinctions between subject, object, and environment. The removal of such boundaries engenders a space that favors dynamic modes of interaction as opposed to hierarchical structures.

Seeing-as is obviously a matter of perception and couched in the perceiver (read as human and nonhuman). Art utilizes the dynamic of perceiver/perceived in this particular kind of space and unfolds it into a
network of crisscrossed sight lines and self-reflexive gestures. By either scrambling the signal or stripping it bare, seeing—as no longer retains its clear correlative. Visuality becomes a dark space where things emerge from the shadows in all their thingness, or their “specific unspecificity,” as Bill Brown defines it in “Thing Theory.” For Caillois this destabilized relation between the individual and space is understood as the following condition: “He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar.”

“Off with their heads!”
—Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

As addressed above, in many ways the very conceptualization of subjecthood is predicated on spatial metaphors: centrality, hierarchy, scale, etc. In what follows I want to discuss specific examples of artworks that challenge the subject through this spatial dimension. In a broader view, the history of art has been a vehicle for cataloging the struggle with representing the Cartesian subject. Who is the subject? What position does the subject assume? What is the relational configuration of the subject to its surroundings? Who defines the politics behind these questions?

When examining the history of the subject in art, one loosely begins with the divine subject, moving to the secular subject (read as white male), moving to the gendered and raced subject, and to the eventual question of why a subject at all? The mechanisms of questioning and challenging subjecthood are varied, both subtle and overt. In the pursuit of getting beyond these hierarchical constructions that not only frame the general malaise of anthropocentrism, but also aggressively enforce gender, race, and class, art has taken the task of chipping away at the centrality of the subject so as to destabilize this system of status. Clearly not all art is concerned with the status of the subject, just as not all philosophy is invested in nonanthropocentrism. However, through discussing these examples aimed at visuality and spatiality, I want to explore those avenues of art that have consciously refuted and lambasted the proclamation cogito ergo sum. It is this trajectory within art that has castrated, dismembered, and ultimately beheaded the subject. These are efforts that aid in an acceptance of questioning and refuting the ontological status of subjects and thereby opening the field to a lateral ontology. It is this particular pursuit and precedent that establishes a constructive rapport with speculative realism.

The two artists I have chosen to discuss offer different mediums, different artistic objectives, and different periods of history to consider. However, they share in their contributions a reanalysis of how the subject figures in representation and, by extension, theory. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, who was active in Italy during the Enlightenment, used the pictorial conventions of perspective and repetition in Carceri (Prisons) to create spaces that depict human figures in decidedly antihumanist ways as well as to challenge the privileged position of the enlightened viewing subject. The twentieth-century installations and photography of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama explore the aggressive obliteration of subjecthood through repetition and patterning as she creates visual fields of slippage between subject, scene, and viewer.

“Eye to a crack in a fence, he sees cranes pulling up other cranes, scaffolding that embrace other scaffolding, beams that prop up other beams.”
—Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities

Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) was trained as an architect and has left behind a rich body of work, including etchings and drawings, that has continued to influence architects and artists alike. In an early series of plates, Piranesi creates foreboding labyrinthine interiors that employ a perversion of perspective and lighting to create uncanny spaces in which the human subject’s centrality is destabilized pictorially as well as in terms of the enlightened viewer’s gaze. The Carceri (Prisons), which includes a second edition titled Carceri d’invenzione (Imaginary Prisons), is a series of sixteen plates begun around 1745 that depict inventive spaces that are both voluminous and claustrophobic in their spatiotemporal constructions. The prison operates as “a model for a vast interior space,” carefully constructed and antithetical to contemporaneous humanist sentiments.

This work is of particular interest not only for its subversion of the subject/object binary, but also for its decidedly contradictory stance to the general sentiments of the Enlightenment. Piranesi’s etchings convey a deeply dystopic vision of progress that does not place faith in reason and human morals. The etchings were begun over four decades before the French Revolution and the eventual crisis of Enlightenment ideals. In a discussion of the Carceri, Andreas Huyssen states that “Piranesi’s etchings from the middle of the age of the Enlightenment point toward a critical and alternative understanding of modernity that always stood against
GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI
Carceri Series, Plate XIV, etching on white laid paper, 1745
Current location: Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum
the naive belief in progress and the moral improvement of mankind.” Coupled with this “critical and alternative understanding of modernity,” these etchings seek to fling the viewing subject and its accompanying surrogate from a privileged place of centrality into the depths of an abysmal environment. Piranesi, an architect highly trained and adept at perspectival rendering, forcefully disrupts the logic of the Euclidean plane and creates a maze of stairways and archways where shadows and rays of light impossibly bend and stretch around corners, with no localized sense of an exterior elsewhere. In his influential book *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, Manfredo Tafuri reinforces a reading of Piranesi that emphasizes “the lawless intertwining of superstructures” and “the undermining of the laws of perspective.” These are highly interiorized spaces—withdrawn and unique.

These overwhelming interiors herald an almost limitless expansion that does not emanate from a fixed point of reference—traditionally being that of the subject. Antoine Picon states that “Piranesi’s *Carceri* mark the emergence of a new kind of representation of landscape,” one in which the seeming absence of the subject proclaims “human action secondary.” In a larger sense, Piranesi’s work plays with a constant avoidance of portraying a stable pictorial notion of subject—human or otherwise. Tafuri has pointed out that “what at first seems to be the subject is later negated and turned into a supplemental element,” thereby shifting the viewer’s attention from one element to the next. In regards to the *Carceri*’s treatment of the human subject, its diminutive figures toil within the voluminous space with little to no identifying markers; they are general and nondescript. Scaling down the subject within its surroundings is certainly not a unique pictorial device in and of itself. It is a strategy visible throughout the history of representation; however, Piranesi’s use of this device yields effects antithetical to many canonical examples. Early Chinese landscape paintings during the Ming dynasty often depicted human figures as miniscule and dwarfed by the surrounding environment. However, the overarching Ming philosophy influencing such works, referred to as *literati* paintings, was the belief that the realm of the mind was elevated above that of the physical world, thereby elevating the subject. Similarly, the Western cultural belief in “Manifest Destiny” was integral to an extensive genre of late nineteenth-century railroad photographers, such as Alexander Gardner, and monumental landscape painters, most notably Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt, who depicted figures overwhelmed by a sublime and expansive natural world. The underlying theme in these highly political works is “presenting westward expansion as a necessary, inevitable, and benign sort of national enterprise.” It is an enterprise in which the westward traveler prevails. But what Piranesi has depicted is different. He provides no transcendent escape for his toilers, nor is there any revelation of their protagonism. The subject is simply refigured and cast down into the depths of an ever-expanding and engulfing environment.

Piranesi’s diminutive shadow figures contain no identities and have no means of egress. Their potential agony, fear, or anxiety is not dramatized into picturesque images of human suffering. They are not the center of the dramatics. They are simply small and secondary. What one finds in the *Carceri* is a focus on the constructed environment in all its material details. These are images describing the space of things: ropes, chains, stairs, stone, statues, light, space, arches, shadows, pulleys, railings, columns. Things support other things and give way to yet more things, which populate a space subtly unhinged from logic. The human subject, dwarfed by the architecture, is essentially absent as things erupt with an overwhelming presence. For Tafuri, the *Carceri* depicts zones in which “not men but only things become truly ‘liberated.’” Piranesi develops interior realms that are rich, dense, and complicated. They are spaces of the uncanny where clear and stable distinctions between subject and object, self and other dissolve into a lateral monumentality. There is no place to emerge up through the confusion; it is an unknowable volume. This is the monumentality of a flat ontology, ceaseless in all directions.

It is not only through pictorial scale that the subject is unhinged from its privileged position. Piranesi’s images reach out from the picture plane to further assault the viewing subject and rattle the distanced viewer’s gaze. The subject is therefore assailed from within and without the picture plane. In order to confound the gaze, Piranesi collapses several perspectives into one, causing the viewer to have a dizzying experience of the work. Huyssen summarizes this experience as follows:

Piranesi refused to represent homogeneous enlightened space in which above and below, inside and outside could be clearly distinguished. Instead he privileged arches and bridges, ladders and staircases, anterooms and passageways. While massive and static in their encasings, the prisons do suggest motion and transition, a back and forth, up and down that disturbs and unmours the gaze of the spectator. Instead of viewing limited spaces from a fixed-observer perspective and from a safe distance, the spectator is drawn into a proliferating labyrinth of staircases, bridges, and passageways that seem to lead into infinite depths left, right, and center.
Piranesi deliberately experimented with sight lines and chiaroscuro to pull away from classical rules of pictorial representation and create environments that swallowed up the subject and caused optical confusion in the viewer. For example, through lowering the sight line he skews a natural perspective to create one “in which the implied viewer is standing much below the architectural object,” which in turn achieves an imposing heightening of the environment. The manipulation of perspective “renders the architectural object larger than human scale would warrant,” thereby breaking with ideal Vitruvian proportions. In the article “Architecture from Without: Body, Logic, and Sex,” Diana Agrest makes explicit the endemic relationship between body, proportion, and architecture: “Vitruvius and Alberti point the way to the incorporation of the body as an analogue, model, or referent, elaborating a system for its transformation into a system of architectural syntactic rules, elements, and meanings.” Agrest continues by identifying the gendered understanding of these ideal proportions, which are always male. Through shifting the sight line away from a naturalist viewing point, Piranesi has shifted prominence away from the subject and toward space. This allows the work to further undercut the primacy of the subject. The human subject is negated through proportion and hierarchy. The subject is no longer the rule and measure.

Building upon the manipulation of space and hierarchy, one finds in the Carceri a centrifugal force that continues to propel the subject from its traditional centrality. In moments, Piranesi’s dark figures are pulled deeper into the architecture as their bodies are cast in shadow. Limbs are flattened into the dark spaces of corners and passageways; silhouettes seem to dissolve into the forms of columns and banisters. These moments embody what Caillois would later address as the organism’s dissolving into its surroundings. The distinct boundaries between subject and field become blurred and permeable. Influenced by French psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski’s analysis of “dark space” and “light space,” Caillois relates:

Minkowski’s analyses are invaluable here: darkness is not the mere absence of light; there is something positive about it. While light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is “filled;” it touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him: hence the ego is permeable for darkness while it is not so for light.

Through Minkowski, Caillois again points to a state lacking “distinction between the milieu and the organism.” In the Carceri dark shadows strike out from spaces and devour figures where they stand. This mimetic assimilation with architecture is a retreat back into space marking a destabilization of the rational Enlightenment subject.

The degree to which Piranesi shifts scale and perspective, to the subject’s detriment, marks a highly influential development in representation. It has notably influenced such films as Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927) and Sergei Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925). These dystopic narratives ultimately arrive at a triumph over the mechanisms of oppression. However, what one finds in the Carceri is a state of limbo, in which the ontological foundations of subjectivity are suspended and negated. In the Carceri the subject is cast into the dark with no light at the end of the tunnel.

“From whatever side one approaches things, the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of distinction.”

—Roger Caillois

Decentralizing the subject through a complete immersion into the surroundings is taken to a further degree and made explicit in the work of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. The artist moved to America in 1957 and produced paintings, installations, and performances throughout the socially tumultuous New York City of the ’60s and ’70s, before returning to Japan in 1973, where she remains active. The overall character of her work is invested in exploring the deconstruction of identity or, more accurately, self-oblation.

Kusama’s large-scale mirrored rooms create highly interiorized spaces that paradoxically point to an infinite expansion. Her iconic installation of 1966, Kusama’s Peep Show/Endless Love Show, figures prominently as an encapsulation of her obsessions with dots, repetition, and immersive environments. The enclosed room lined with mirrors and colored lights is only visible through two small windows—just big enough to peer inside. The effect is a hallucinatory expanse, which multiplies the viewer’s own image, plummeting the image of self into an infinite duplication that marks the ego as mere copy as opposed to master surveyor. This gesture exposes the presupposition of subjective autonomy by “placing us in an environment in which we watch ourselves being engulfed.” Similar to Piranesi’s repeated arches and use of light and shadow to inflate a sense of volume, Kusama’s use of mirrors and colored lights warps the perspectival grid into an illusory expanse, leaving the viewer as a dot among thousands.
YAYOI KUSAMA

Top: Infinity Mirrored Room–Love Forever, 1994
Installation view: Solo exhibition “Yayoi Kusama” at Le consortium, Dijon, France in 2000. Copyright: YAYOI KUSAMA

Bottom: Kusama’s Self-Obliteration, 1967
16mm color film, 23min. Copyright: YAYOI KUSAMA
The Peep Show comes at a point in history when many self-identified feminist artists were forcing the issues of gender equality and exposing the lowly ontological footing of the female subject. Female artists, such as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, and Valie Export, threw their bodies directly into their art practice as a means of bringing these issues to the forefront. Lucy Lippard has noted that such efforts were overwhelmingly met with this conclusion:

Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. She is a narcissist, and Vito Acconci, with his less romantic image and pimply back, is an artist.32

The notion of a “peep show” draws attention to this object-status of the female body. Kusama capitalizes on that dynamic by playing with expectations: as the viewers peer inside, they are met only with their own disembodied gaze. Commenting on this thwarted voyeurism, Claire Bishop observes, “The only performers are your own eyes darting in their sockets, multiplied to infinity.”33 The Peep Show proposes a stage in which the traditional performers are removed and the stage folds back onto itself in an endlessly self-reflexive display of dramatics. The theoretically distanced gaze is literally reduced to disembodied eyes straining to fulfill a negated pleasure. The viewer’s eyes join the infinity of flashing lights as captured performers in an endless field.

The uprooted gaze is pulled deeper into this dark space. The endless depth generated through the mirrors propels the vanishing point farther and farther away. Upon peering into the peep show, the viewer relinquishes his or her stronghold at the viewing position and is doubled at the farthest reaches of the vanishing point. The viewer is forced to operate at both ends of the viewing spectrum, as well as at infinite points along the way. It is within this structuring of visibility that “the self-possession of the viewing subject has built into it, therefore, the principle of its own abolition: annihilation of the subject as center is a condition of the very moment of the look.”34 The “annihilation of the subject” is at the heart of Kusama’s work, or in her own words, “self-obliteration.”

The video titled Self-Obliteration (1967) typifies this pursuit of dissolving the subject into its surroundings. The video begins with pulsating flashes of drawings of infinity nets and dots—a recurring motif throughout her oeuvre. The video progresses to follow the artist throughout various natural environments where the application of polka dots becomes a unifying veneer to all things: human, animal, animate, inanimate. Categories of difference are meant to dissolve under the mark of the dot. This body of work also includes a series of photographs and collages that generate a similar “flattening” effect to the ontological hierarchy. The application of dots diminishes the categories of difference and decreases contrast between subject, object, and field. Repetition becomes a democratizing force that collapses degrees of resemblance into a field of homogeneity. It is in this sense that seeing-as is no longer possible, as all things begin to drop aspectual differences. There is no longer a flipping back and forth between object, subject, or surround—everything is everything.

Caillois’s essay on mimicry becomes an important sociological as well as theoretical framework to situate these works concerning immersive environments. Caillois was less interested in insect mimicry as it manifests as an evolutionarily successful defense mechanism than as it reveals itself as a “dangerous luxury,” in the case of mimicry’s being so successful that insects of the same species mistake each other for leaves and begin devouring.35 It is this pathological condition that produces the “simulation of the leaf being a provocation to cannibalism.”36 For Caillois, this was the very real danger in the “temptation of space.”37 Space provokes that dangerous desire to lose oneself, to be engulfed, to be obliterated. It is the temptation to lose oneself in space that Kusama invokes again and again through various instances of repetition culminating in the “mimetic experience of fragmentation.”38

For Kusama, the mark of the dot acts as a cipher for further disrupting the spatiotemporal location of the subject in its milieu. The subject for her is not only the human and singular; in Self-Obliteration the fractured cinematic narrative depicts Kusama in the act of applying dots to herself, fellow actors, a horse, a cat, trees, and grass, and even dropping dollops of ink into a pond. The unedited dispersal of dots disrupts the unique coordinates of one individual in relation to another by means of multiplication and subsequent conflation. This gradual breaking down of boundaries between self, other, and outside marks, for Caillois, the moment when “the organism . . . is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself.”39 This goes beyond the initial gesture of decentralizing the subject—it proliferates a “generalization of space at the expense of the individual.”40 This in turn breaks down a seeing-as dynamic. If all things linger in an expanded state of conflation without distinction, then there is no longer seeing one object as this or that; there is
simply a blanket seeing things. Beyond the diminutive figures overwhelmed and lost to the passageways of the Carceri, Kusama proposes the subject, herself included, be engulfed by the scene and come out on the other side indistinguishable: a thing among things.

The repeated motif of engulfment marks for Kusama the moment when the specificity of place collapses under the unspecificity of space. Under the sign of the dot, the locational identity attached to place is unhinged through the proliferation of an otherwise unique marker. A single dot in space defines an exact spot as specific and unique. However, once that unique value is multiplied and expanded, it is drained of its capacity to single out and identify. The multiplication of the dot now serves to mark an expansive space, not a singular place, and therefore whatever or whoever bears this mark is equally cast out of a unique, singular place.

As discussed earlier, it is under these conditions that the subject no longer remains the origins of its own coordinates in space, as the similarity of space consumes and breaks down figure/ground, self/other relations. It is in this way that Kusama’s work moves closer to Nishitani’s field of śūnyatā. For Nishitani, śūnyatā is not as “catastrophic” and “threatening” as is the destituting force in the intrusion of the other for Sartre and Lacan. The subject rather, acquiesces to this space of “radical impermanence” and joins the dynamic network of interchanging relations and exchanging glances.

The subject is not destroyed as much as it experiences a return to the state of things before the cultural encoding of hierarchies. Kusama’s decentralizing of the subject is not born of malice; rather, it carries with it a mimetic desire for inclusion.

Through Kusama as through Piranesi, the subject is constantly challenged in a space that does not adhere to classical notions of anthro-primacy. The work of Piranesi and Kusama approaches the subject through spatiality and visuality to question its ontological necessity. They cast the subject into a dark space where it can no longer reign over the object and the surroundings. These spaces, which are populated by things, lawless perspectives, and vanishing points on an endless horizon, are exactly the same sites in which a flat ontology structures a universe devoid of hierarchical laws. Employing the devices of space and sight serves to further reinforce the dimensionality of a flat ontology and explore this as a terrain with a rich history of questioning and experimentation. A flat ontology is not one in which everything is simply leveled out and made equal—it is a dynamic field of forces. For Piranesi, centrifugal forces propel the subject into the darkened corners and passageways and generate perspectives that do not converge at a single point. For Kusama, digestive forces move the subject through immersive surroundings, breaking down its primacy and singularity, and depositing it back onto the field as plural and similar. It is such forces that dismantle the verticality of anthropocentrism—leveling it and realigning it with an expansive and endless horizon.

3. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 97.
6. Ibid., 100.
7. Ibid., 101.
9. Ibid.
14. For a full discussion of Heidegger’s tool analysis in relation to object-oriented ontology, see: Graham Harman, Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects (Chicago: Open Court Publisher, 2002).
19. This is a particular viewing subject defined by its distanced and objective position, which would be firmly established in Kant’s “Critique of Judgment” in 1790.
30. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Bishop, Installation Art, 90.
40. Ibid., 31.
The use of three dimensions isn’t the use of a given form. . . . So far, considered most widely, three dimensions are mostly a space to move into.

—Donald Judd, “Specific Objects”