

Repetition and Accumulation

Pengulangan dan Pengumpulan

Mohd Fauzi Sedon, Tajul Shuhaizam Said, Harozila Ramli, Siti Fazlina Isnin

Fakulti Seni, Komputeran & Industri Kreatif.

E-mel: mohd.fauzi@fskik.upsi.edu.my

Abstract

Artists have explored the concept of repetition and accumulation in variety of different forms to represent various contexts: visually, emotionally and psychologically. Kusama's work especially in relation to the structure of forms and elements where the use of infinite, repetitive elements, multiple image reflection and the effect of colours in creating large scale installation have strongly influenced and changed our perception and emotion. Infinite variation of geometric repetitive system of shape and form is the central of Sol LeWitt practices which in combinations offer infinitely variable composition. Meanwhile, Gower has a long career in working with collage using recycled materials to form repetitive pattern that produced active optical experience. Repetition through continuous activities is the major theme of Kawara's work where he translates the daily routine into the representation of social life.

Keywords: repetition, accumulation, variation, infinity

Abstrak

Para pelukis telah meneroka konsep pengulangan dan pengumpulan dalam pelbagai bentuk yang berbeza untuk mewakili pelbagai konteks: visual, emosi dan psikologi. Karya Kusama terutamanya dalam konteks struktur bentuk dan unsur-unsur di mana penggunaan elemen variasi, pengulangan, pantulan imej pelbagai dan kesan warna dalam mewujudkan karya instalasi berskala besar yang berupaya mempengaruhi dan mengubah persepsi dan emosi. Pengolahan elemen variasi menerusi sistem geometri yang berulang-ulang rupa dan bentuk dan merupakan kaedah utama Sol LeWitt yang mana kombinasi yang terbentuk mencipta komposisi yang tiada batasan. Sementara itu, Gower mempunyai kerjaya yang meluas dalam menghasilkan karya-karya kolaj menggunakan bahan kitar semula untuk membentuk corak yang berulang-ulang yang mempengaruhi pengalaman optik aktif. Pengulangan melalui aktiviti-aktiviti yang berterusan adalah tema utama di dalam karya-karya Kawara di mana beliau menterjemahkan rutin harian kepada representasi kehidupan sosial.

Kata kunci: pengulangan, pengumpulan, variasi, infiniti

INTRODUCTION

Repetition is an element that has no boundaries, which can be explored in any directions and with infinite variations. Accumulation is an expansion of repetition and is created by reproduction and duplication of the same process, image and form. Repetition expresses the feeling of being identical but at the same time it also employs the characteristics of difference. Through the form of similarity, repetition is a major strategy for producing emphasis, clarity, amplification or emotional effect. This is what repetition is all about, the organizing principle of rhythmic structure; often regarded with the notion of similarity and standardization as well as uniqueness and differences.

Yayoi Kusama

Artists like Yayoi Kusama have explored the themes of infinity, obsession and accumulation since the late 1950s. Kusama's primary motifs are the polka-dot and net patterns. She compulsively links and repetitively develops accumulation as an important part of her art. An example of her application of soft and subtle colour can be seen in *Infinity Net*, in which the monochromatic effect and the illusion of space between positive and negative patterns is particularly marked. It is a 33 feet long by 10 feet high white net painting that was exhibited in the Radich Gallery, New York in 1961. She covered the wall completely with a white monochrome canvas, densely and completely covered with spiraling chains of tiny circular marks. She likened the net painting to the mark-making typical of action painting. 'I feel she wrote as if I was driving on the highway or carried on a conveyor belt, without ending to my death'.¹ She goes on to say,

This is like continuing to drink thousands of cups of coffee or eating thousands of feet of macaroni. This is to continue to desire and to escape all sorts of feeling and vision until the end of my days whether I want to or not.²

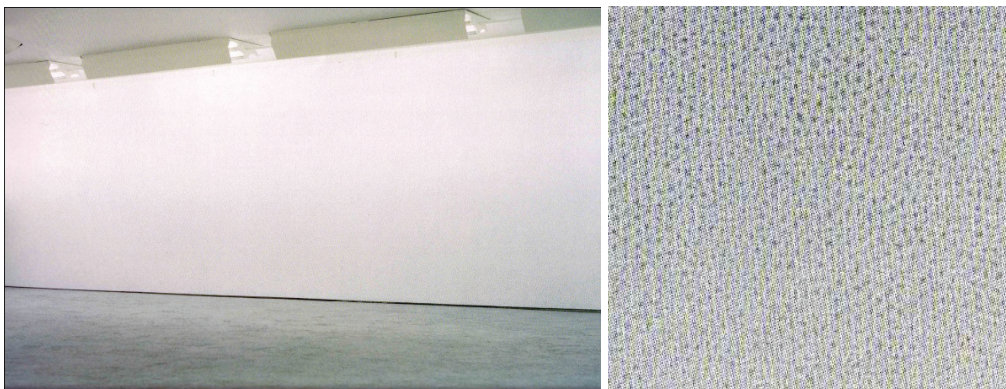


Figure 1 *Infinity Net*, 1961 (installation view and detail).

In works like *Infinity Net*, she employs endlessly accumulating patterns on a monochromatic background. The composition can be likened to a mural, which is obsessively worked from edge to edge with repeated interlocking motifs. There is no systematic application of stroke and composition. The chains of holes are linked together randomly and the spiraling pattern gives a sense of depth, spatiality and surface vibration to the work. Her pigments are subtly two-toned – a creamy colour covered by bright white. This colour combination gives a monochrome effect that confuses positive and negative pictorial space.

Kusama has put a lot of effort into visualizing her obsessive state of mind during the making process. For her the consistent pattern is ‘repeated exactly in monotone like a gear of a machine’.³ The painting comprises thousands of diminutive and intersecting circles of paint forming a continuous matrix of circular marks without composition, beginning, end, or focus. The time-consuming process of making became part of the work itself.

The technique that she uses creates a feeling of continuity and emptiness. Kusama presents complexity and subtlety within an overall minimal structure. Examples such as *Infinity Net* produce a sense of being overwhelmed - where viewers feel lost in a visual whirlpool of consuming form. One becomes aware of the complex relation the work have to the psychological agitations that the artist has experienced and suffered since childhood. Kusama said, ‘I am always standing in the middle of the obsession against the passionate accumulation and repetition inside of me and am lost’.⁴

The effect of accumulation produced by the repetitive polka-dot motif is unique and mysterious particularly in the mirror room works in which her image is multiplied endlessly. Exploration of the reflection of images on mirrors has been the most prominent concern in *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* and *Dots Obsession*. In both installations, the use of warm colour and multiple reflections of images have a strong role in influencing and changing our perception and emotion.

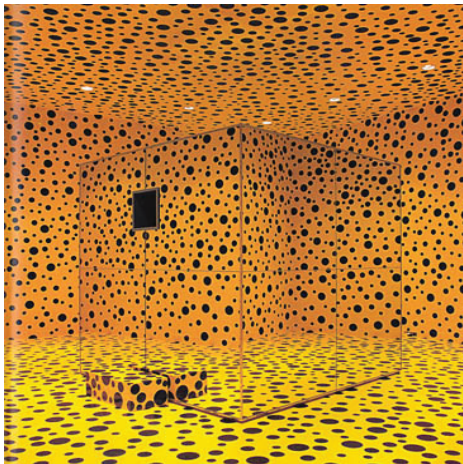


Figure 2 *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)*, 1991



Figure 3 *Dots Obsession*, 1998.

In Kusama's *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)*, the work is built to create a dizzying effect where the dots disappear into infinity. The room is bright orange and covered with a black polka dot pattern over the floor, walls and ceiling. In the centre of the space is a mirrored box, the size of a small room, with a small window. A mirror works as a device, which obliterates everything within the space - dismantling and accumulating, proliferating and separating. The accumulation of polka dots of different sizes creates an ambiguous sense of depth and an effect of visual hallucination. The dots and the audience alike, endlessly multiplied by mirrors, became a part of the experience.

The artist has created an environment both strange and mysterious, one that evokes a strong psychological context. 'In these work, true synthesis occurs between the intangible mystery of the artist's unique perception and the sensory experience offered to others by her art',⁵ explained Rhana Devenport. The installation suggests a kaleidoscopic mode of perception, in which the interior of the room contains unbounded and seemingly endless spaces and the repetitive accumulations of reflected patterns create an infinitely recurring environment. The space is physically and visually intensified further by repetition of black dots based on the artists system of accumulation. Kusama explained in *Manhattan Suicide Addict* (extract) 1978,

... A polka dot has the form of the sun which is a symbol of the energy of the whole world and our living life, and also the form of the moon which is calm, round, soft, colourful, senseless and unknowing. Polka dots can't stay alone, like the communicative life of people. Two and three and more polka dots become movement. Our earth is only one polka dot among the million stars in the cosmos. Polka dots are a way to infinity.⁶

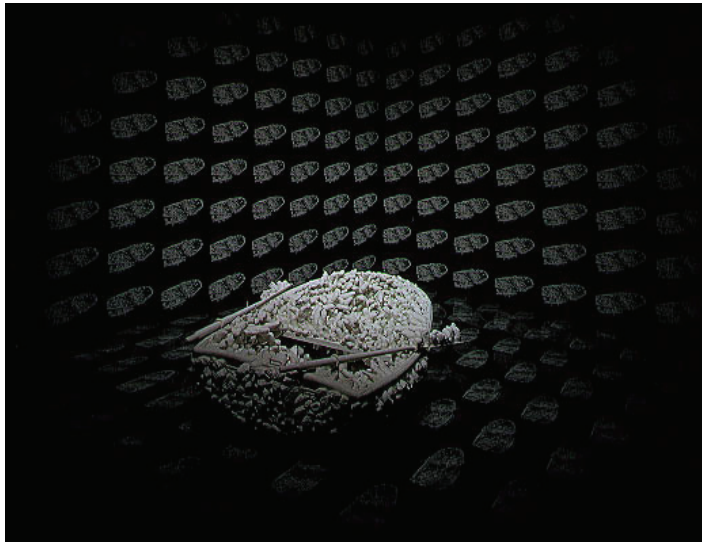


Figure 4 *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show*, 1963.

In *Aggregation: One Thousand Boat Show*, the artist applies the repetition of negative images. The structure of the composition and the dramatic quality of the black colour produced a very unique and mysterious effect. This work consisted of an eight-

foot rowing boat and two oars covered completely with white phallic accumulations and 999 black and white poster size photo reproductions of the sculpture. Lynn Zelevansky wrote, ‘Within these spaces images replicate themselves in a manner that gives the fullest expression to her abiding notion of infinite repetition’.⁷ The room was totally covered by black and white boat images from floor to ceiling. The use of white images over a black background gives the impression of dramatic intensity, which is generated by the dark environment and the negative effect of white images as well as the contrast between the repeated images when compared to the real boat placed in the middle of the room. Laura Hoptman has described the work in the following way:

“...The 999 black and white mural images dramatically created the frame of mind in which to view the real one. Both multiplication of the image and the multiplication of those curious phallic bumps were found to be hypnotic by the viewers... At the end of the hallway, lit by a white spotlight and waiting like a reward, was the original boat, beached in all its splendour, surrounded by its pale simulacra.

Like seeing a movie star in person, the thrill of confronting this one-thousandth boat eloquently – if theatrically – argued for the superiority of the original over its eminently reproduction copy.”⁸

Like many artists working with repetitive elements, Sol LeWitt’s work are based on repetitive geometric systems such as grids, parallels, and concentric circles which in combinations offer infinitely variable compositions. Repetition, accumulation, colour, space and environment are vital elements in his ‘wall drawing’ series. His work derive from simple ideas, but the impact is unpredictable and complex. Michael Kirby has suggested, ‘Words or sketch or model may have the same concept as the show, but the results, in term of experience, are vastly different. I think it is very important to Sol’s work that the experience can’t be predicted, even by himself’.⁹



Figure 5 *Wall Drawing – All Combination of Arcs from Corners and Sides; Straight, Not-Straight and Broken Lines, 1976.*

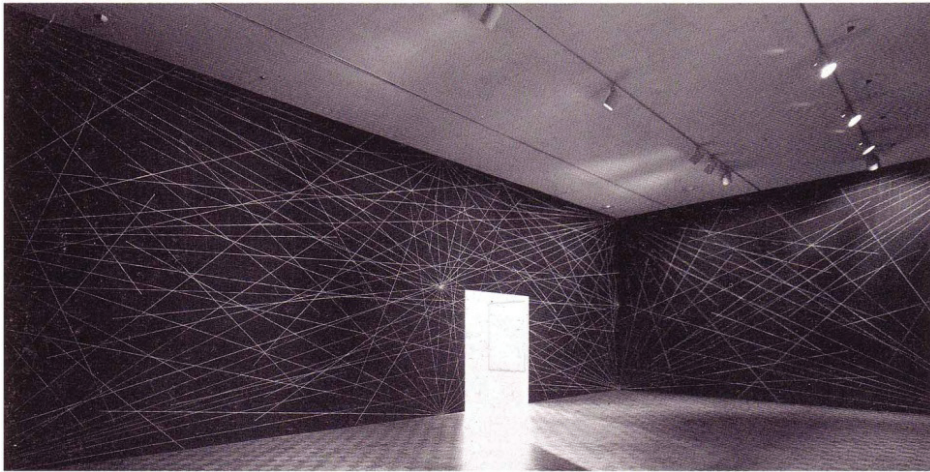


Figure 6 *Wall Drawing – Twenty-Four Lines From The Centre Of The Wall, Twelve Lines From Each Midpoint Of Four Sides, Twelve Lines From Each Of Four Corners To Points On Six-Inch Grid and Twelve Lines From Each Of Four Corners To Points on Six-Inch Grid, 1976.*

In his works, *Wall Drawing – All Combination of Arcs from Corners and Sides; Straight, Not-Straight and Broken Lines* (1976) and *Wall Drawing – Twenty-Four Lines From The Centre Of The Wall, Twelve Lines From Each Midpoint Of Four Sides, Twelve Lines From Each Of Four Corners To Points On Six-Inch Grid And Twelve Lines From Each Of Four Corners To Points On Six-Inch Grid* (1976), the subject is line which provides a simple starting point that, through different combinations, variations and directions, produces a powerful visual experience. The walls are black and are covered with white line drawings. The black wall closes the space in while the lines express activity and chaos, and at the same time it also demonstrates the ‘systematic graffiti, graphic residues that refresh our attention to their settings’.¹⁰ The use of white lines over a black background produces strong contrasts and the accumulation of repetitive lines over and over creates the feeling of sameness, continuity and an endless experience. Our eye runs along one line to another; creating a sense of never-ending movement: one tries to find the difference and the similarity from hundreds of repetitive line in different sizes and directions. Trevor Fairbrother wrote, ‘He expects the formal elements of his conspicuously simple structures to function as the perceptible “grammar” of his work’.¹¹ Through this work, LeWitt presents complexity within a simple and minimal structure; emphasizing ideas over psychological expression and letting other people experience the ideas through their physical and visual form. He has explored repetition, accumulation and variation of a basic form and line in a variety of wall drawings.

In the case of the Australian artist, Elizabeth Gower, *All Life Long* (1984) is a work that employs collage using recycled material. The work was made up many layers of shredded magazines and promotional fliers. The three layers of tulle were full of fragmented coloured strips and applied acrylic paint and were hung from ceiling to floor along the full length of the space. The colours were strong and vibrant which produced an active optical experience. Our eyes running through the space follow the open rhythmical movement of repetitive shapes in different colours and sizes.

‘...The process, however, of accumulating, sorting, and piecing together small repetitive fragments to make a whole is still an important recurring aspect of the work. My work is abstract, very personal and reflective of fleeting memories and emotional turmoils and optimisms’,¹² says Gower.



Figure 7 *All Life Long*, 1984

The accumulations of fragmented shapes that arranged in different direction created a rhythmic vibrations and whirling effect. As Jonathan Holmes reported, ‘The shower burst shapes seem to force the eye out and across the work’.¹³ Gower explained about the work,

Over a long period of time the work was laboriously built-up by layers of thin strips of shredded media pulp. It can appear to be both calm and chaotic, controlled and whimsical, weaving in and out of itself or abruptly congesting, fanning out or converging in.¹⁴

Repetition informs much of our daily life; we repeat our daily routine without realizing the details. The underlying themes of On Kawara works are repetition and continuous activity. For example On Kawara’s series “*I MET*” and “*I Got Up*” are the documentation of the simple fact of his own existence in time. As Olle Granath wrote ‘Self-evident actions that mark the boundary and the transition from unconscious to conscious, actions that are a necessary condition for all social life’.¹⁵

“*I Met*” series was started in 1968 in Mexico City which contained the name of certain people Kawara met during each day and set down on separate sheets of paper with the date on each. Each sequence runs to the number of days the artist spent consecutively in one place, and is preceded by an extra sheet recording the locality. The series continued for several years and enabled the artist to record thousands of different names. The typewritten pages are sheathed in transparent plastic and assembled on loose-leaf binders.

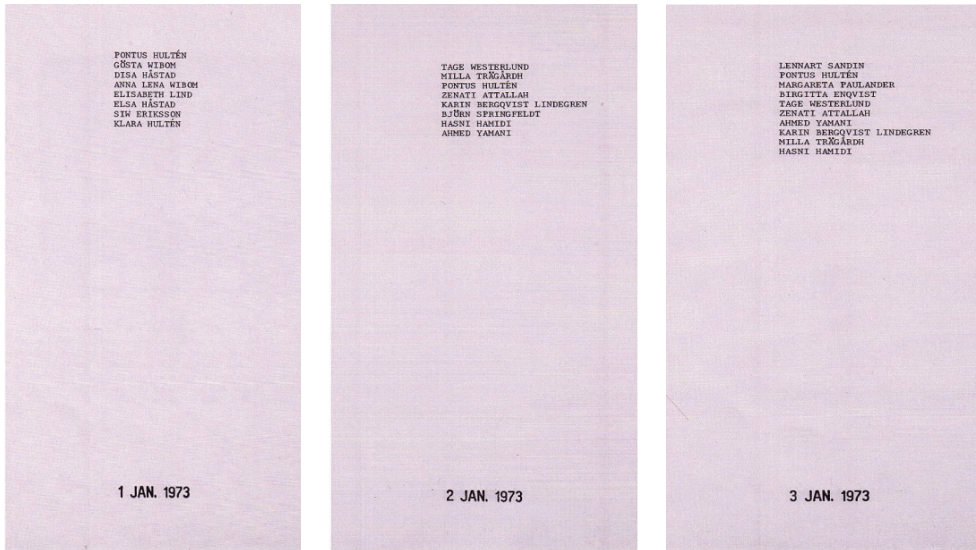


Figure 8 *I MET*, 1979



Figure 9 *I Got Up*, 1978.

The “*I Got Up*” series was started in Mexico City in 1968 and continued until September 1979 when Kawara was in Stockholm. In this series, he mailed two postcards every day to his friends with the rubber-stamped information about when and where he got out of bed. By the end of the series he had already sent over 7000 postcards. The subject is simple but there is much information stated on the postcard. For example the tourist-typical images, date, stamp, postage marks, and message. As René Denizot explained,

On Kawara relates the usual system of information on time and space, topographical information in time and space which men have agreed upon, emphatically of his own self and thereby gives them — while retaining every abstraction of the system — a terrifying reality.¹⁶

We probably find familiar locations that bring back our memory and experiences. Kawara has rubber-stamped the word “I got up at [for example] 7.06 AM” on one postcard: each postcard had the time but this will vary from day to day. We may discover different times and days when Kawara got up late – indicating, by suggestion, different kinds of social and private activities occurring each day.

Conclusion

Repetition and accumulation are the elements that can be explored in many different range of strategies to represent variety of issues and contexts which are able to create complex multi-sensory responses visually, emotionally and psychologically. The characteristics of repetition naturally create the sense of visual unity within the structure of accumulative images. Through systematic combination and variation, the exploration of repetition and accumulation is able to construct complex perceptual effects that evokes a range of curiosities and experiences.

Endnotes

- ¹ Hoptman, L., (1998). ‘Down to Zero: Yayoi Kusama and the European “New Tendency”’, *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama 1958-1968*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles Country of Modern Art, pp. 47-48.
- ² Hoptman, L., (1998). *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama 1958-1968*, p. 48.
- ³ Ibid., p. 48.
- ⁴ Kimmelman, M., ‘Yayoi Kusama: Early Drawing From the Collection of Richard Castellane’. Retrieved from <http://www.artsbma.org/kusamapr1.htm>
- ⁵ Devenport, R., (2002). ‘Yayoi Kusama – It Started From Hallucination’, *APT 2002: Asia- Pacific Triennial Of Contemporary Art*, Exhibition Catalogue, Queensland: Queensland Art Gallery, p. 61.
- ⁶ Hoptman, L. Tahehata, A.,and Kultermann, U., (2001). *Yayoi Kusama*, London: Phaidon Press Ltd., p. 124.
- ⁷ Zelevansky, L., (1998). ‘Driving Image: Yayoi Kusama in New York’, *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama 1958-1968*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles Country of Modern Art, p. 25.
- ⁸ Hoptman, L., (2001). ‘Yayoi Kusama: A Reckoning’, *Yayoi Kusama*, p. 56.
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- ¹⁰ Baker, K., (1988). *Minimalism*, New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, p. 94.
- ¹¹ Fairbrother, T., (1992). ‘Sol LeWitt’s drawings and the art of “logical statement”’, *Sol Lewitt Drawing 1958-1992*, The Hague: Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1992. (non-paginated).
- ¹² Quoted by Holmes, J., (1984). ‘Elizabeth Gower: All Life Long’, *On Site*, Exhibition Catalogue, Hobart: Tasmanian School of Art Gallery, p. 13.
- ¹³ Quoted by Holmes, J., (1984). p. 35.
- ¹⁴ Quoted by Holmes, J., (1984). p. 14.
- ¹⁵ Granath, O., (1980). ‘A Point Between Life and Death’, *On Kawara – continuity / discontinuity 1963-1979*, Stockholm: Moderna Museet, p. 9.
- ¹⁶ Denizot, R., (1979). *The Daily Images of Power – On Kawara From Day to Day*, Paris: Yvon Lambert, p. 31.

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