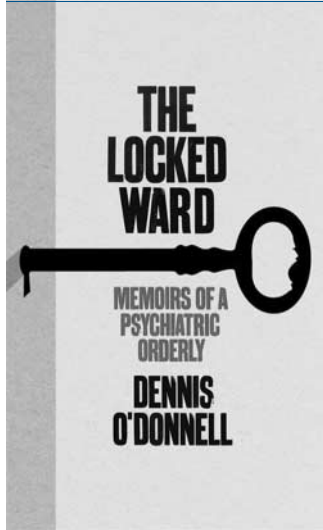


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge, Femi Oyeboode
and Rosalind Ramsay



**The Locked Ward:
Memoirs of a Psychiatric
Orderly**

By Dennis O'Donnell.
Jonathan Cape. 2012.
£16.99 (hb). 352 pp.
ISBN: 9780224093606

This is a potentially fascinating account of life in a Scottish intensive psychiatric care unit. The author was an English teacher for many years before leaving to work as a psychiatric orderly. He worked in the Locked Ward for over 7 years. The problem is that 'the people [in the book] are fictions', as are the staff, so this is not strictly a memoir. This detracts from the authenticity of O'Donnell's descriptions: he might have been better writing a work of fiction based on his experiences.

The book is mainly an account of the various (fictitious) patients admitted. O'Donnell punctuates the descriptions of individual cases with brief explanations of psychiatric disorders, their consequences and medication used. These are written in a much plainer style than the rest of the book, and sit slightly oddly. Most are fairly clear for a non-professional to read, although there are a few aspects that grate, such as referring to antidepressants as 'uppers'. He also describes the symptoms and treatment (electroconvulsive therapy) of a young man with a significant depressive disorder; this man responds well to treatment, but is then said to be selfish, unpleasant and unpopular. Given the author's lack of expertise in psychiatry, this seems rather a dubious judgement to make of someone who is still an in-patient; perhaps not unreasonable to acknowledge that genuine psychiatric illness does not preclude an offensive personality, but inappropriate.

O'Donnell does maintain a sense of humour throughout – 'Devout coward slain by madman' is an imagined headline. By his own admission, he gets on well with patients, but at times this does come across as patronising, perhaps partly due to his rather florid style, using local dialect but throwing in rather over-the-top descriptions and quotations. The most authentic passages are the plainer descriptions of everyday life on the ward and the difficulties experienced. Ultimately, this book is certainly interesting, but seems to be more about the writing than the content, and comes across as only patchily convincing.

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**Infinity Net:
The Autobiography
of Yayoi Kusama**

By Yayoi Kusama.
Tate Publishing. 2011.
£14.99 (hb). 256pp.
ISBN: 9781854379658

Yayoi Kusama was born in 1929. She is, perhaps, Japan's foremost living artist. She has lived, voluntarily, in a psychiatric hospital since 1975 while continuing to produce her art and to write novels and poetry. She was a leading avant-garde artist in New York in the 1960s and counted as friends or colleagues such artists as Andy Warhol, Donald Judd, and Joseph Cornell, with whom she had a close relationship. This autobiography was published to coincide with her retrospective at London's Tate Modern in 2012.

The title, *Infinity Net*, refers to one of the two enduring characteristics of Kusama's art, nets. Her art is often described as obsessive because of the ceaseless preoccupation with nets and polka dots, a preoccupation that has endured for many decades. Speaking of the nets, Kusama wrote:

'I would cover a canvas with nets, then continue painting them on the table, on the floor, and finally on my own body. As I repeated this process over and over again, the nets began to expand to infinity. I forgot about myself as they enveloped me, clinging to my arms and legs and clothes and filling the entire room. I woke one morning to find the nets I had painted the previous day stuck to the windows. Marvelling at this, I went to touch them, and they crawled on and into the skin of my hands' (p. 20).

Her perception of nets and use of this abnormal experience in her art alongside the use of dots had both symbolic meaning and theoretical basis that were at once simple and complex. She imagined her own life as a single dot in an infinite matrix of other dots, the matrix being the net that joined the dots together and the net then extending to the infinity of the universe. Her desire seemed to be to obliterate the nature of the canvas by covering it totally in dots and nets such that it merged with the room and then with the universe. This approach to art not only disoriented the viewer because there was no focal point to the canvas but was also disturbing as it lacked form and boundary. Kusama also created soft sculptures shaped like penises, what she referred to as 'psycho-somatic art'. Again, she produced these objects obsessively, creating multitudinous assemblages of penises crafted into chairs, settees, boats, etc. Her explanation was that:

'I began by making penises in order to heal my feelings of disgust towards sex. Reproducing the objects, again and again, was my way of conquering the fear. It was a kind of self-therapy' (p. 42).

Kusama was born into a well-established family of 'high social standing'. Her father married into the family and adopted the Kusama name. This arrangement caused tension within the family. Whereas her father supported and encouraged her art, her mother was opposed to her wish to become an artist. She first experienced abnormal visual and auditory phenomena at a young age of 12. She writes:

'It was from about that time that I began to experience regular visual and aural hallucinations – seeing auras around objects, or hearing the speech of plants and animals . . . One day I suddenly looked up to find that each and every violet had its own individual, human-like facial expression, and to my astonishment they were all talking to me. The voices quickly grew in number and volume, until the sound of them

hurt my ears. I had thought that only humans could speak, so I was surprised that the violets were using words to communicate. They were all like human faces looking at me. I was so terrified that my legs began shaking' (p. 62).

She later experienced palinopsia, visual distortions and transformations, and intensely vivid visual hallucinations.

In this autobiography, Kusama writes lyrically, deploying poetic language and images, with utmost honesty and frankness about her life, the motivating force of her art, and explaining as far as words permit the sources and guiding principles of her art. She is an unusual person, not only gifted but able to speak of her artistic creations. Her life, and the place of abnormal experiences and phenomena in her art, are both of interest to

psychiatrists. Despite living in a psychiatric institution for close to 40 years, she continues to write and to make art of the highest quality. Her writing is lucid and her ideas, even when off the beaten track, are always exciting and challenging. Her work undermines the notion that severe mental illness is incompatible with art of the highest standard.

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