

# Engaging children in the interdisciplinary aesthetics of fashion design inspired by Y.Kusama

Katerina Kokkinaki<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(University of West Attica, Greece)

**ABSTRACT:** Yayoi Kusama with her interdisciplinary aesthetic approach seems to blur boundaries and place art in the real context of everyday life. Placing herself within the installations she makes a statement about the contemporary and complex role of artist, connecting in her own way art, design, fashion and environment. Y.Kusama seems to be a suitable case for young children to understand the connection between arts through playful learning. This project was created in the context of a comprehensive program of art around the daily lives of children and in accordance to Action Research. Children were inspired by Y.Kusama's work to design their own paper-clothes and through this creative process they achieved greater freedom and fewer stereotypes about the artist's role, thus bringing aesthetics into the realm of real life. Via this experiential and playful framework, children learned to think holistically, with greater mathematical understanding and critical reflection. Additionally, this project also led to practices of narration and art therapy.

**KEYWORDS:** - Interdisciplinary aesthetics, Yayoi Kusama, Playful learning, Action Research, Children's art

## I. YAYOI KUSAMA'S INTERDISCIPLINARY AESTHETIC APPROACH

Yayoi Kusama managed to blur the aesthetic, social, personal and political boundaries through various art media throughout her career. Her immersive installations are distinctive. She is herself often present in the work, showing in this way her insistence on the material reality of the body. She is usually photographed within her artworks highlighting, in a playful way, the connection of body and artistic work. Y.Kusama poses herself inside the creation of her new 'places', luxuriating in the colours, textures and sensations. Body and dress are integral components of her artwork and their relationship to the surrounding environment is given prominence (McCartney & Tynan, 2021).

Furthermore, her early works remind us of our cosmic existence through the infinite replication of the patterns and draws attention to the permeability of boundaries of self and other. Y.Kusama does not set boundaries between the individual, the environment and the clothing, just as she does not praise art by placing it between museum and gallery but within the context of everyday life. Also, she exposes her body in commercial contexts, questioning about the limits of art. In fact, Kusama's mode of expression expands from the material art and performance in an environmental and philosophical direction. In a more personal interpretation, it seems like she is releasing her microworld within herself to the outside, in order to project the infinite space. Her art transcends time, generation, gender, region and culture, as well as the various vocabularies of contemporary art (Kataoka).

## II. METHOD

The project was carried out in the context of author's doctoral research, who dealt with arts in the everyday life of children. The research follows the framework of 'action research' in a primary school group

through the 'project-based learning' method. The mixed group consisted of 25 children, aged between seven and twelve years old.

Moreover, this programme was approved by the Ethics and Conduct Committee of the University of West Attica, as well as by the parents of the participants. Children in this project were inspired of Yayoi Kusama and how she connects fashion design with environments. They created improvised garments of paper. The aim of the project was for children to discover aesthetics in their everyday life, triggered by fashion, and develop them across various interdisciplinary fields.

The main research questions are:

1. Whether fashion design shape interdisciplinary methods of aesthetics among primary school students?
2. Whether children understand that art is everywhere around them even in fashion?
3. Whether children through their study in contemporary artists, like Yayoi Kusama, develop their critical reflection and thus overcome stereotypes?
4. Is Yayoi Kusama an artist who can inspire children to express themselves with freedom?

### **Action research in primary education**

Primary education provides a fertile ground for research studies that aim in the activating of perception, in change and in personality formation. The education of children lends itself to interventionist type work plans, since children from 5 to 10 old, are at their most receptive age (Kalouri-Adonopoulou, 1999, p. 89). Children at this age learn mainly experientially and communicate emotionally. They learn about the world through their senses and emotions, they explore everything around them, and finally they learn how to learn.

According to the characteristics and requirements of the present research, Educational Action Research was deemed as the most appropriate method, since it is mainly characterized by its participatory and collaborative nature, the open dialogue, the critical and reflective dimension, the circular and formative character of the processes. Gilbert De Landsheere (1996) says that the purpose of Action Research is to link what traditional research tends to separate: theory and practice, research and action, psychology and social, emotional and cognitive. In Action Research the researcher is asked to propose solutions or ways to bring about change and monitor the effectiveness of these changes (Tsiolis, 2014, p. 51). Research and teaching are treated as an indivisible whole, addressing issues that have been identified and improving the educational process as a whole. Efforts are made for personal and group change in practices, beliefs and perceptions (Katsarou, 2016, p. 295). Action Research aims to be participatory, collaborative and as inclusive as possible. All active "subjects" are involved as partners in the research decisions, regarding both the content of the research and the methods that are used (Katsarou, 2016, pp. 246-253). Action research enables the study of a situation in a holistic way where all factors are treated as a set of relationships that interact with each other (Globou & Kakana, 2020, p. 100)

### **Use of thematic analysis to focus on the meanings**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data of this project. It is a flexible method of analysis, which can be used with multiple modes of interpretation that originate from different theoretical or scientific starting points (Braun & Clarke, 2012). It is a method of identifying, highlighting and describing recurring meaningful patterns, 'themes', that emerge from the qualitative research data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). These themes are revealed through systematic identification, organization and understanding of the whole research data set (Braun & Clarke 2012). The analysis process requires fine manipulation in order to meet the in-depth analysis of the data. The detection of a theme is mainly determined by the extent to which it is considered important in relation to the research purpose (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

What's more, the researcher has to make sense of, to connect and interpret the research material, according to specific scientific assumptions and the overall research design. After the researcher traces the numerous patterns and gains access to collective ways of making sense, then focuses on the meanings that are most appropriate for answering her research questions (Braun & Clarke 2012, p. 57; Tsiolis, 2014). V.Braun and V.Clarke (2006, p. 87) speak of the researcher's 'immersion' in the research data set. Especially in the present

study with numerous different data formats, Thematic Analysis seemed to be a particularly useful method to reduce the meanings by an abstractive process in order to capture the important elements and concepts contained in the data (Ayres, 2008). Consequently, coding is a dual process that aims through conceptualization to reduce the complexity of the material and at the same time open up new interpretive possibilities and conceptual frameworks. Coding, functions more as a conceptual schema, which on the one hand enable the data to be understood and on the other hand is malleable and amenable to transformation.

### **The methodological tools of observation and reflection diary**

Observation means “seeing” with all senses a situation that is growing. At the same time the information is collected and recorded, with the scope of studying it afterwards, in order to help the research to draw conclusions. The true elements that make up a situation, can be identified by observing the real field where the phenomena take place (Kedra, 2003). What differentiates the observation method from others is that the researcher studies the social phenomena which are produced in real-life conditions (Kyriazi, 2000).

Also, observation is ideal for research in the early years of education, where the active involvement of children can be achieved through interesting activities as they act in material space by using their whole body (Tzekaki, 2007, p. 110-111). S.Stacey (2020, p. 50) encourages educators to observe how children act with materials, whether they insist on a single way, or other more unusual ways. Observation in Action Research is always participatory, in the sense that the observer participates in the collective life of those he observes, looks, listens, talks with them. From the other side, the observers know that the researcher observes them and for what purpose. That is, he is also part of the educational situation he observes (Katsarou, 2016, p. 288). In participatory observation, the observer-researcher becomes a “player” in the action, appropriating one of the roles he studies and collecting data through its active participation in the group activities (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010). Reflection helps the educator to elongate the moment in order to reflect on what is happening. Observation and reflection soon become a habit, a natural and spontaneous way for the teacher-researcher to function in the classroom. S.Stacey (2020, pp. 232-240) argues that this approach allows educators to become researchers within their own workplace.

Educators during the observation use to pause for a moment what they are doing and connect the information to what they have seen or what they are about to do next. The pause and the break from action, gives the teacher the space to make sense of what is being observed. It is often a period of instability as it attempts to unify thought and action. What accompanies often this brake is a dynamic and creative tool of qualitative research, the "diary". Through the diary technique teacher becomes more aware of what is happening around him/her, what he/she is doing in each situation, knowing what is unformed in him/her, but also himself/herself as an educator. He/she discovers the wisdom that lies within, confirming or challenging his/her beliefs. Writing on diary is a natural process because of its effortlessness, unhindered by second thoughts or expectations of others (Katsarou, 2016, p. 291). The diary in this research was the most important tool as it preserved events, ideas, concerns, reflections and feelings (Katsarou, 2016, p. 292).



1st Diagram: Process of the project "Improved fashion made of paper"

### III. RESULTS-INTERPRETATION OF RESEARCH DATA

#### Breaking down conventions of art through dialectic

Children through creative dialogue and discussions broke down early conventions and stereotypes. In a discussion about Yayoi Kusama's installation (Figure 1) the children's inability to interpret her work was established. Y.Kusama was located inside the installation, dressed in clothes she had designed herself, in the same pattern as the surrounding area. The children did not understand that the person inside the installation was its creator. The researcher challenged the children to observe the artist's make-up and her clothing in relation to the installation's decoration. However, the children were unable to connect the creator with the art-work, even if the patterns of the clothes and the space were designed the same - the children thought it was just a random event. After continuous questions and answers, they discovered the identification details of the creator in relation to the installation.

It is ascertained that children do not perceive fashion design as art form, since they can't imagine an artist's action to design and exhibit his/her clothes as he/she becomes part of an installation. What is found is that children form strict rules and beliefs about what art can be, what an artist does or has the right to do, or about the non-boundaries between genres of art. However, if we want creative children the inclusion of dialectical communication in education is very important. Through discussion and dialogue, the individual plays an active role in the reception of the representations and sees the aspects from different angles (Paraskevopoulos, 1985, p. 124). Children also capture stimuli with a fresh eye when they do not judge prematurely and do not perceive

reality with predetermined stereotype categories (Paraskevopoulos, 1985, p. 124). M.Greene (1981) argues that when children acquire aesthetic literacy, they are more likely to avoid adopting stereotypes. Furthermore, when school discussion takes place in a warm and playful environment, it makes children to talk non-stop, thereby cultivating critical thinking, interpretation and aesthetic negotiation. When children are encouraged to reflect, predict, wonder and hypothesize, critical reflection and reflective thinking develop.

Furthermore, art and design as practices are connected to a range of things that are made in the real world and to the diversity of people who use them; so, it is inevitable to provoke debates, touching on social issues that are complex and nuanced. Design offers a suitable environment to trigger a discussion, as social, economic and other factors are intertwined in its use, giving us the opportunity to collect opinions, attitudes or prejudices and work on them (Georgiadou, 2019). The reason that aesthetic discussion, specifically around design, can make the group more inclusive and receptive is the very diversity of the subject.



Figure 1: Y.Kusama at Louis Vuitton boutique window, displaying her collection (2012)

Source: <https://www.dazeddigital.com/>

### **The holistic disposition of design thinking**

Children in this project acted naturally as "designer thinkers". Through the design thinking method, they followed a strategic action with clear steps and distinct stages, such as, observation, reflection, ideation, implementation and testing. This method made things tangible and understandable. Children at this age need a strategy and a routine, as their perception of the world is pragmatic. Design thinking as a method offers a model of a series of thoughts and processes on which children can build with openness their creativity (Lewis, 2005) developing their thinking and other skills as well as their culture.

Design thinking can be seen as a holistic approach of learning, as it constantly negotiates issues from everyday life (Rauth et al., 2010). The interdisciplinary disposition of the design allows children to process information and evidence from various sciences and learning fields. Design thinking is a multifaceted and complex process (Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Dym et al., 2005). A. Watson (2001) describes student's reactions to design thinking: "I hear children talking about design, making sense of ambiguity, empathizing with others, thinking creatively, communicating ideas, working together and making people laugh." In Figure 2 we can see the collaboration between two children during the construction of their improvised clothes. Children managed to create their suits, by measuring, building, helping their partner, while having fun. Engaging children in design thinking activities can become a transformative experience of surprise, companionship and joyous discovery (Panke, 2019).



Figure 2: Children help each other for the creation of the garments by measuring their bodies

### **Fashion design in the development of mathematical and spatial thinking**

The pragmatical side of this project revealed elements of cognitive development which were related to the children's mathematical, spatial, ergonomic and geometric abilities. During the design of the improvised textiles, children worked on proportions and scales. They enlarged the pattern designs to construct their own stencils and then they repeated and traced them on the surface of a large paper. After that, they tried to illustrate the sketches by transferring the general shape and characteristics to the improvised garment. In the stage of the construction children had to combine imagination and innovation for more functionality (Figure 3). At the end, they connected the garment with the studio of photography via the wallpaper they created (figure). For young children, mathematical thinking is very often linked with the development of spatial thinking, as it involves placements and movements in space with their corresponding representations (Tzekaki, 2015). Moreover, this activity was highly cooperative as children required the help of their partner to try the improvised clothing on their own body. At the same time, while the children observed the application on their classmate, they understood their own physical dimensions.



Image 3: Details of the improvised garments

### **Children narrate through the embodiment of their inventions**

Narration in this project is used as a tool of study for children's culture through design thinking. Children have the physical ability to narrate in many ways. Through the design narratives, we can understand what children want to say and what is important to them. Narration and creative storytelling are long considered as an inherent feature of the design process and has the potential to enhance ideation and creativity. Also, design narrative is ideal for children as it is not a literal interpretation of what something physically is, but more of what it means to be (Blaylock, 2003).

During the project, children realized their imaginary clothing among superheroes and other characters of their culture (Figure 3). "Clothing is not just a covering of the body but a system of signs which is interconnected with other semiotic systems of society, through which we can send messages about our views (...)"(Danesi, 2017, pp. 197-203). After all, children are very familiar with the narrative patterns of cartoons, which can be an excellent occasion for creating a story. Superheroes partly shape children's aesthetics, and that's not a bad thing, especially when they deal with narratives, which can be personified. "Children's ideas are not filtered or shunned, for example Barbie, electronic toys and cartoon character figures, are welcomed to play a dominant role in the planning and direction of work projects" (New, 2017, pp. 354-355).



Figure 3: Sketch of an iconic superhero for the design of the garment

Later, in the last day of the fashion project, it was observed that children left the school excited wearing their improvised outfits, while the older ones did not wish to do the same (Figure 4). Young children are much less preconceived by nature and like to pretend to be something else via costume dramas (Goldstein, 2018). Unlike children who are approaching the age of puberty and need to be more realistic. In general, it was discovered that all the children supported their improvised clothes, explaining to their classmates and teachers who asked them how they created them. Weeks later, a parent said that his/her child had hung the improvised garment in the closet and displayed it when someone was visiting them. At the end of the school term another parent said that even during their move, the child carried the improvised garment and placed it in the new wardrobe, as if it was one of the other clothes. Children's insistence on maintaining their improvised construction, demonstrates that they can recognize that '[...] clothes can be interpreted as a sign that declares elements of the personality and character of the wearer' (Danesi, 2017, p. 197-203).



Figure 4: Children pose with their improvised garments outfits

#### **Y.Kusama's therapeutic repetition as a method**

During the process of improvised textile design, children reproduced prints. This was an easy and creative activity that freed them from special art techniques. At the same time children worked in a participatory collaborative format with joy and fun. The way children acted with the prints turned into a playful activity, which through constant repetition, gave rhythm to the project (Figure 5). The process of "repetition" in a project is not just a method of art but a therapeutic practice too. M.A.Mulherin (2001) argues that when a child acts out its anxiety and trauma through play then it can gain mastery over it. In the case of Y.Kusama the repeated patterns create a sense of stability and predictability, which help the anxiety to alleviate. The repetitive nature of the dots creates a rhythmic pattern that can be both soothing and overwhelming (Atanaria, 2024). After all, for Y.Kusama (2011) the physical act of artmaking is a form of therapy. By concentrating on repetition through a variety of mediums, Y.Kusama eliminates boundaries and merges her world with the external reality (Fowler, 2022). In our case, the easy nature of this activity, transformed children in active participants. It was an inclusive and democratic method, allowing all children even those without special artistic skills to take part. In this study it was important for all children in the group to start caring about aesthetics.



Figure 4: Children pose with their improvised garments outfits

### **The body as a canvas**

Children could be conceived as an embodied canvas while they created their improvised costumes through this kind of creative play. Like Y.Kusama's performances (Body Festivals in the 1960) when she often used her own body as a canvas. Then she and her collaborators painted each other's bodies with polka dots, effectively transforming themselves into living artworks. The use of the body was a way for Y.Kusama to challenge the conventional notions of art and the artist's role. By making her own body part of the artwork, Y.Kusama questioned the traditional separation between the creator and the creation, the subject and the object and at the same time reflecting her ongoing exploration of the boundaries between the self and the universe (Atanaria, 2024). Y.Kusama is a personality who can demonstrate art in a multi-level action, showing children that they can make their everyday life more aesthetic in more ways than one.

### **Connecting body, space and fashion in children's experiential perception**

Via the creation of the fashion studio, as an art installation, children's improvised clothes were activated within the material space, according to the patterns of the composition (Figure 6). The children created their own microcosm and through the process of a symbolic play, they became fashion designers, artists, directors and photographers. The different roles helped children to put themselves in the shoes of the creator as well as the audience that participates in an installation, by interpreting the events. The children loved being inside the facility they created. They wore their improvised clothes and played roles. It was like a magical world where they were allowed to dress and pose as they wished. Children through this playful action acquired the sense of the space, and connected with the place in a single set of aesthetic perception.

The experiential perception of the place is a challenge and a conquest in the aesthetics of young children. The experience of place and self as a whole is very important for their aesthetic development. The participation in the shaping of their environment is a necessary element for the proper functioning of the mechanisms of the social and mental development of young children (Tsoukala, 2015). As H.Wallon (1984) argues, children's need to create places is directly related to the construction of the "personal" space. The identity of space is linked to the identity of the inner self. In addition, children understand that aesthetics is an interconnected system of people, things, places and behaviors, and the way to see them is the same experience of life. Children develop their spatial

identity when they interact within a network of relationships, which develop by the experience of use the space its objects and the other users of this area (Tsakiris, 2013).



Figure 6: Children pose with their improvised garments outfits into the studio of photography

## Conclusions

To sum up, Y.Kusama is an excellent example of artist, on which an educator can build a lesson plan and combine many different learning and scientific fields. Critical interpretation, deepening in the role of contemporary art, the statement and the social action, are just some issues that can excite children through discussions, as they seem so new for them. Furthermore Y.Kusama's personality, as a person who plays with art and reality, has the potential to demonstrate how everyday life can be given more fun and aesthetic. When children act in the way Y.Kusama faced art, they can transform themselves into what they imagine. They may express themselves with more freedom, thinking out of the box, have fun with art, be their own special, personal, emotional and cultural selves. In general, Y.Kusama's philosophy is permissive and ideal for teaching children the importance of aesthetics in their lives.

The results of this project spread across multiple interdisciplinary fields, such as mathematical and spatial thinking, embodied narration, therapeutic art practices and space experiential perception, demonstrating the existence of aesthetics in multiple fields that govern aspects of children's lives.

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