

## The Stage in the Sky

The newly renovated South Observation Deck at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building unveils a unique piano that is proving to be an artistic force for cultural exchange.

by **Anne Lucas**

A young teenage boy steps toward the grand piano. He pauses briefly before taking a seat at the instrument he is about to play, probably to absorb the unusual yellow color adorned with black patterns. He has never seen anything like it. This is unmistakably a work created under the supervision of avant-garde Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. Then he begins an astounding rendition of “Moonlight Sonata” by Beethoven.

Nearly every person in the observatory turns to watch him. As he finishes, the crowd gives him a round of applause for his impromptu performance. It is an incredibly moving intersection of young Japanese talent and one of the most revered and oldest living artists in the country. The impact is heightened by the fact we are standing 202 meters above ground level; views of sprawling Tokyo visible through the windows. The experience is enough to perfectly convey and fulfill the purpose of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in installing this piano: to bring local people and travelers in the area together through the power of art, culture, and music.

The observation area was refurbished at the beginning of April 2019 with changes made including window glare reduction, expansion of the spaces for better wheelchair access so that people can now get closer to some of the windows for a better view, and a newly built deck area using wood from the Tama suburbs of Tokyo.

As for the piano set up in the room, it offers a chance for valuable exchange through music with the idea in mind that more foreign tourists will be visiting for the Rugby World Cup 2019™ and the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020. Understanding the value in the purpose of the piano installation, Kusama agreed to supervise its artistic treatment.

Born in 1929, Kusama has been active in the art world for nearly six decades. She has become globally recognized for her work and has been awarded the title of Tokyo Honorable Citizen. In 2017, she opened her very own Yayoi Kusama Museum in Shinjuku Ward. Aside from her ubiquitous polka dots, she is also famed for her sculptures, installations, and “Infinity Mirror Rooms.”

The instrument that now resides in the 45<sup>th</sup>-floor South Observation Deck was donated by a Tokyo resident and has been named “Tokyo Metropolitan Government Omoide Piano”—the “Piano of Memories”—a nod to the 30 years of happy memories it holds from its previous owner and players, as well as to the new memories that will surely be made here. Since its unveiling on April 8, it has already attracted a plethora of musicians of all ages, including tourists visiting from abroad, all eager to have their turn tickling these already iconic keys. Best of all, it is free to play and no reservation is needed. Musicians simply need to arrive and enjoy their five minutes of showmanship on this extraordinary stage in the sky.



People who visit the Observation Deck can hear beautiful melodies played on “Tokyo Metropolitan Government Omoide Piano, collaborated with Yayoi Kusama.”