FLY
YOKO ONO

FLY

ANDERSON GALLERY
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
OCTOBER 18 - DECEMBER 23, 1996
FLY PIECE

Fly.

1963 summer
SOMETIMES A WORD IS WORTH A THOUSAND PICTURES:
YOKO ONO’S ART AS A VERB

Kevin Concannon

When you go to a museum the tendency is to just look at a painting. I thought art was a verb rather than a noun and so I wanted an action quality to the experience. ¹

Fly. Noun; verb; adjective. Work of art. Beyond the walls of the Anderson Gallery, on billboards, T-shirts, and posters throughout Richmond, Yoko Ono’s enigmatic art engages its audience in a simple yet rich flight of the imagination. A word alone, lacking grammatical context; the viewer is left to create its meaning.

As a noun, it might refer to an insect or a pant zipper. In British slang, ‘fly’ is an adjective, meaning ‘alert; clever; sharp.’² An African-American speaker might describe someone as ‘fly,’ meaning ‘fast and ecstatic; brash; good or great.’³ And as a verb, it might suggest fleeing - or more hopefully - the boundless freedom of unaided human flight.

I like the idea of flying. I’m not talking about the idea of flying on a plane or anything like that. It’s just [that] a conceptual idea of flight is beautiful. And so I did a lot with flying. It’s a conceptual flight. And I want to encourage people to do that.⁴

For Ono, Fly is about freedom, the yearning for it, and something more. The idea that, as humans, we use only about ten percent of our brain power - and the associated theory of ‘memory genes’ - intrigues her. According to this theory, an enormous, untapped, human potential sits encoded in our genes, waiting to be accessed.

Most of us probably feel that the human race is at its deathbed or something - that we’re an old culture. I definitely don’t think so. I think that we’re like an embryo. We’re in an embryonic stage of growth and I think that when we grow a little bit more in awareness, that we’re going to come out of this embryonic stage, and we’ll look around....So at that stage, flying is, well, it’s not just asking for freedom. We have to make an incredible conceptual flight, a flight of our awareness, without being afraid of it. That’s the only reason we’re not seeing things - because we’re afraid and we don’t want to see them. But I think that one day we might decide that we’re strong enough to see.
In *Fly*, language itself becomes a medium for visual art, and a broad range of information and experience is compressed in these three letters, awaiting realization and actualization. The art of Yoko Ono is less an object than an active verb.

The use of language as visual art is most often associated with Conceptualism. While most histories date the advent of Conceptual Art, and the use of language as art, to Joseph Kosuth's 1965 piece, *One and Three Chairs*, it has recently been pointed out by Alexandra Munroe that, "in fact it was Yoko Ono who first announced that language, by itself on a gallery wall, is a justifiable form of art." On May 24, 1962, three years before Kosuth's *Chairs*, Ono exhibited her *Instructions for Paintings* (text-only paintings) at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo. A year earlier, in 1961, she had exhibited instruction paintings at the AG Gallery in New York; in that case, however, they took the form of canvases with instructions attached. In taking the very radical step of exhibiting instructions only at Sogetsu, Ono's conceptual intentions were somewhat obscured by Japanese tradition, in which calligraphy is seen as an art form in and of itself.

To make the point that the instructions were not themselves graphic images, I wanted the instructions to be typed. But in those days, regular typewriters for the Japanese language were not available. Only professional printers and newspapers had typesetting machines. So I thought of the next best thing, which was to ask Toshi Ichiyanagi to print out the instructions by hand. He complied. My handwriting was too emotional, even when I tried to print - it looked like I was asking people to appreciate the visual aspect of the writing itself. Toshi was able to do a very neat job - close to typesetting, since, as a composer, he had experience in copying his own scores for print.

For Ono, the fascination with language and word play came quite naturally. "My first language is Japanese. When you learn English, you always say 'Is this an adjective or adverb or a verb or a noun?' And we're always aware of the fact that some words are both." Speaking of her 1963 *Fly Piece*, a related work published in her 1964 book, *Grapefruit*, Ono has stated "My feeling is that I'm just throwing a pebble in the water, and it is going to create a ripple. I'm not going to control the ripple." The viewer must construct his or
her own mental image when confronted with a piece such as *Fly* (1996). Indeed, most of Ono's work requires its audience to complete it, sometimes quite literally. For her *Add Colour Painting*, exhibited at London's Indica Gallery in 1966, visitors were encouraged to 'complete' the blank canvas through the application of paint - one color per visitor. The painting was deemed complete when it was purchased. An instruction, on the other hand, can be realized in any number of different forms (currently including the World Wide Web). Gallery viewers encountering a text piece on the wall are left to realize it in their minds, for example. A performance context for the same piece offers additional options:

**FLY PIECE**

*Fly.*

This piece was first performed in Tokyo, Naiqua Gallery, 1964. Each person who attended the night flew in his/her own way. It was performed again in London at Jeanette Cochrane Theatre, by the audience who came up on the stage and jumped off the different leveled ladders prepared for them.

Taking the form of billboards, posters, a banner, and T-shirts, as it does here in Richmond, *Fly* operates in the wider social realm of advertising, deliberately encountering viewers in places and situations that are unexpected. Ono is, of course, widely known for her 1969 poster action, *War is Over!* created in collaboration with John Lennon. For that event, launched December 15, 1969, the couple commissioned billboards in twelve cities: Athens, Berlin, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Montreal, New York, Paris, Port-of-Spain (Trinidad), Rome, Tokyo and Toronto. In the language of each city where they were sited, the billboards declared “War is Over! / If You Want It / Happy Christmas from John and Yoko.”

Installation shot of *Fly Piece* in *Color, Fly, Sky* exhibition (August 22–November 30, 1992) at Museet for Samtidskunst, Roskilde, Denmark. Photo: Jon Hendricks
In fact, Ono had used advertising contexts for pieces on several earlier occasions. In March of 1965, she placed a display ad for her conceptual exhibition at the fictional IsReal Gallery in *The New York Arts Calendar.*13 The “exhibition,” however, existed only on the pages of that magazine and in the minds of its readers. The following year, she placed three advertising pieces in the London-based magazine, *Art and Artists.*14 Perhaps the best-known of her magazine advertising pieces is “Museum of Modern F art” (1971). For this work, Ono placed a paid display advertisement in *The Village Voice* announcing her (again, non-existent) one woman show at the Museum of Modern Art.15 The ad also included a mail-in order form with which one could purchase the ‘catalogue’ (which did exist). Not only did Ono publish a catalogue for the ‘exhibition,’ she also documented it in her film *The Museum of Modern Art Show* (1971, 7 minutes) - through the responses of visitors interviewed as they left the museum. A version of this ‘exhibition,’ *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show Museum of Contemporary Art* (September 16 - November 16, 1996), is currently featured on the World Wide Web.16

In 1994, Ono’s *A Celebration of Being Human*, a project in the small German town of Langenhagen, featured thousands of black and white images of a pair of bare human buttocks, reproduced on billboards, bus stops, kiosks, posters hung from lampposts, posters hung in shop windows, T-shirts, umbrellas and “postcards handed out free in this suburb of 50,000 inhabitants.”17 A text accompanied the image: “A Celebration of Being Human. - We are beautiful. - We are fun. - We are mammals without tails.” Upon being asked if she wasn’t a bit behind the times, as advertising executives had long been exploiting the promotional value of a well-formed bottom, she told the German news magazine *Der Spiegel,* “Sure, but those are small, stylish, cute arses. I’m advertising a really nice average bum.”18 And what she’s selling is peace, a message that has been at the heart of her work for more than three decades. The exhibition, she told *The Independent,* “is designed to make viewers wonder about the subject and to prompt thoughts of peace. Art, as a part of peace, is beautiful.”19
women shut up (laughs), but shutting up is death in a way. So we were always kind of pretending to be dead.

The film also deliberately engages issues of viewer reception. As viewers realize very different images in their minds when confronted with Fly as a text piece, this too is the case with the film. While the seemingly solitary focus on the fly's (and flies') journey across the human landscape might seem straightforward, viewers perceived very different things.

I was curious what a man would go through. Would a guy be watching the lines of the body or would he be watching the fly? Or sometimes they would be watching the fly and noticing that their mind was going to the lines of the body and then there might be some kind of psychological struggle. That was part of it and that was a very interesting thing that should happen and did happen. But the surprising thing was the other side of it which was the great anger. You know it's not very pleasant for flies to be on your body crawling around. And that anger side of the emotion that was in that film was never discussed.

The film's soundtrack (which resonates throughout the Anderson Gallery installation) was almost unanimously understood by critics to represent the fly. But for Ono, "it was to do with the woman's moaning in a way, too - a woman's cry rather - of going through life tip-toeing around." Ono has, in fact, created distinctly feminist work in a variety of media throughout her career. In her 1964 Cut Piece, she knelt on the stage in

Film still from Fly (1970, directed by Yoko Ono)

Fly is also the title of a 1970 film (featured in the exhibition as a video) and a 1971 album that featured the film's soundtrack as one of its tracks. In the film, we see a fly (and later, several flies) crawling through the landscape of a nude female body.

When I was creating the film, I was just interested in the movement of the fly and also in the beauty of the lines of the body. There are many kinds of levels.... When you look at the film, in the end you will see that it's about what women go through, too. So it's a bit of a feminist statement as well.... When the camera moves back a little and shows the whole body then you really don't know whether the body is a dead body or a live body in a way. But a live body which is almost simulating a dead body is what a woman has to go through. This whole idea of a male society was based on the fact that...
her finest suit with a pair of scissors on the floor in front of her, inviting members of the audience to approach the stage and cut off pieces of her clothing. The performance suggests the passive and sexually submissive roles assigned to women in our society, and the violence that constitutes the other half of that phenomenon. Eight years later, a song Ono co-wrote with John Lennon would cause a stir when they performed it in May 1972 on the Dick Cavett Show. The song's title, Woman is the Nigger of the World, made the network more than a bit uneasy and forced Cavett to offer a disclaimer prior to its performance by Ono and Lennon.  

Example) and even maligned, her messages of peace fared better. Play It By Trust (1966-1991), a work based on her earlier Chess Set, shown at London's Indica Gallery in 1966, is one of many works with peace as its theme. In both cases, the board and game pieces are all white, eliminating the traditional means by which opponents distinguish themselves from one another. What stood perhaps in 1966 for peace on a more personal level, took on more obviously global implications in the 1991 work, which accommodates 20 players. Following the 1966 work, Ono, often in collaboration with John Lennon, became increasingly involved in peace as a decidedly political issue. The Bed-In and War is Over! campaign of 1969 are two well-known examples of that collaboration. In 1987, she attended the International Forum for a Nuclear-Free World in Moscow. "It made me choke up when Mr. Gorbachev thanked me and John for our efforts on behalf of peace all these years, and when he said John should have been here for this peace conference." And, of course, in 1991, the year in which the new version was created, there was a major Middle East Peace Conference as well. Interviewed for this essay, Ono confirmed that this idea of the Peace Conference was indeed on her mind when creating Play It By Trust (1991).

The Blue Room Event (1966-96) is a text installation piece, first done in Ono's New York apartment in 1966. In some instances, Ono writes directly on the wall. In other installations, framed texts (in both Japanese and English versions) have been used. More declaration than instruction, a series of statements on the walls, ceiling, floor, and even windows, invites the viewer to

*Chess Set, 1966, Instruction: For playing as long as you can remember where all your pieces are. Photo: Iain Macmillan*

*While Ono's feminist politics were often missed (as was the case with most film critics' interpretations of Fly), misunderstood (by the Dick Cavett Show's censors, for example) and even maligned, her messages of peace fared better. Play It By Trust (1966-1991), a work based on her earlier Chess Set, shown at London's Indica Gallery in 1966, is one of many works with peace as its theme. In both cases, the board and game pieces are all white, eliminating the traditional means by which opponents distinguish themselves from one another. What stood perhaps in 1966 for peace on a more personal level, took on more obviously global implications in the 1991 work, which accommodates 20 players. Following the 1966 work, Ono, often in collaboration with John Lennon, became increasingly involved in peace as a decidedly political issue. The Bed-In and War is Over! campaign of 1969 are two well-known examples of that collaboration. In 1987, she attended the International Forum for a Nuclear-Free World in Moscow. "It made me choke up when Mr. Gorbachev thanked me and John for our efforts on behalf of peace all these years, and when he said John should have been here for this peace conference." And, of course, in 1991, the year in which the new version was created, there was a major Middle East Peace Conference as well. Interviewed for this essay, Ono confirmed that this idea of the Peace Conference was indeed on her mind when creating Play It By Trust (1991).*

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collaborate with the artist to transform the physical space of the gallery into an ethereal architecture of the mind. "This room slowly evaporates every day." "This room glows in the dark while we are asleep." "This is not here." On the white wall, a text informs the visitor that "this room is bright blue." Another admonishes the viewer to "stay until the room is blue." In their reconciliation of the empirical evidence and the written declarations and instructions, the viewers complete the work, each in a different way. For Ono, "there may be a dream that two dream together, but there is no chair that two see together."23

and of itself difficult to reconcile. In Weight Object #1, a brass key and a brass sphere, of apparently quite different weights, sit in perfect balance on an antique scale. A text accompanies the object:

MINDSCALE
66 90

Examples of equal weights:

extreme poverty - extreme wealth
intense love - intense hatred
total anonymity - total fame
strength - weakness
woman - man

i.e.: if you put weight on one side,
you will find yourself on the other side

This and other works speak to issues of differing values and the processes by which we assign those values. Her 1972 song, We're All Water, makes the same point in a verse, for example, that reads:

There may not be much

difference

Between Rockefeller and you
If we hear you sing.24

Also implicit in these works are the concerns of an artist involved in the politics of feminism, civil rights, and world peace.
Water Talk

you are water
I'm water
we're all water in different containers
that's why it's so easy to meet
someday we'll evaporate together

but even after the water's gone
we'll probably point to the container
and say, "there's me there, that one."
we're container minders

y.o. 1967

CLEANING PIECE

y.o. '96

Make a numbered list of sadness in your life.
Pile up stones corresponding to those numbers.
Add a stone each time there is a sadness.
Burn the list and appreciate
the mount of stones for its beauty.

Make a numbered list of happiness in your life.
Pile up stones corresponding to those numbers.
Add a stone each time there is a happiness.
Compare the mount of stones
to the one of sadness.

Cleaning Piece (1996) works with the idea of balance
as well. The piles of stones before us tangibly represent
our joys and sorrows, equally available for aesthetic
contemplation and enjoyment. As surrogates for our
own emotions, the stones in Cleaning Piece allow us to
at once free our minds and at the same time see clearly
that our experience of art happens not on the wall (or
the floor), but rather in our own minds. Beginning
with an instruction and two designated spots on the
floor, visitors add the stones that give physical form to
the work. The black and white canvases on the walls
record this transformation of our emotions as visitors
attach their own sorrows and joys to them in the forms
of notes, photographs, and other materials corresponding
to the stone piles throughout the course of the exhibition.

Wish Tree (detail), installed at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa
Monica, California, 1996, Courtesy Shoshana Wayne Gallery
Yoko Ono has stated that all her work is a form of wishing. Wish Tree, a work installed outdoors at the gallery entrance, is based on the Japanese tradition of writing one’s wishes on pieces of paper and tying them to trees in temple courtyards. This work exemplifies Ono’s characteristic preference for the conceptual over the physical as well as the key role of audience participation in her work. As our wishes are tied onto the tree’s branches, they are transformed into flowers, nourished by the earth below and the sky above - blossoming in our minds. And as we enter the gallery, we might also consider that a temple is not a museum of art, but rather a part of our head that surrounds our mind.

FOOTNOTES


4 All quotes, unless otherwise specified, are from a telephone interview with Yoko Ono by the author, September 4, 1996.


8 Originally published in a limited edition of 500 copies by the Wuntermann Press in Tokyo in 1964, it was republished by Simon and Schuster in 1970 and by their Touchstone Books division in 1971 (as a paperback).

9 See Mario Amaya, “Games Mistress,” The Financial Times (November 12, 1966). Amaya goes on to suggest that, “presumably this does not stop the buyer from continuing to paint on it if he wants to.”

10 From September 17 through December 25, 1996, Ono is posting a new set of instructions, one each day, with which visitors can interact through replies that are subsequently posted on the website The site, called Acorns: 100 Days with Yoko Ono/1996, is at http://dnp.v.s.expoc96.ad.jpyoko/.


13 Yoko Ono, “(Circle Event at IsReal Gallery),” The New York Art Calendar, Vol. 2, No. 6 (March 1965), p. 64. Along with the ad, the space for which was donated by publisher (Harvey) Marshall Matusow, this issue featured a listing for the fictional gallery in its gallery guide (p. 41) and a ‘reproduction’ of Circle Event (p. 58). Curiously, this ad appeared during the same month that Dan Graham’s ad/magazine piece “Figurative” appeared in Harper’s Bazaar. Both ads implicitly address concerns about the gallery system and alternative contexts for the presentation of works of art. Thanks to Janis Ekdahl of the Museum of Modern Art Library in New York for assistance in locating this citation.
Again the ad space was donated by the publisher, in this case, Ono’s friend Mario Amayo. The three pieces/ads were: “Fountain Piece,” *Art and Artists*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (October 1966), p. 44; “Mouthpiece,” *Art and Artists*, Vol. 1, No. 8 (November 1966), p. 39; and “Do It Yourself Dance Piece/Swim in Your Sleep,” *Art and Artists*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (December 1966), p. 73. “Mouthpiece” was first published in Ono’s *Do It Yourself Fluxfest* (designed by George Maciunas) as part of 3 newspaper events for *The Price of $1* (Fluxus Newspaper No. 7, February 1966). Another piece from *Do It Yourself Fluxfest* was published in the January 1968 issue of *The Promethean: A Symposium for Liberal Religious Youth* (Boston), apparently unknown to Ono until this interview. Thanks to Clare Storey and Adrian Glew of the Tate Gallery in London (Library and Archives, respectively) for assistance in locating these citations.


“Yoko Ono Inundates Hanover Suburb with 70,000 'moon-shots,’” *Agence France Presse* (wire report), October 26, 1994. See also Kai Bauer and Michael Stephan, *Vor Ort 1994* (exhibition catalogue), (Langenhagen: Schul- und Kulturamt der Stadt Langenhagen, 1994). The bottoms, of course, evoke memories of Ono’s famous film *No. 4 (Bottoms)*, 1966. In September and October 1996, one of these billboards was erected near London’s Euston Station as part of the project *The Visible and the Invisible: Re-presenting the Body in Contemporary Art and Society* (21 September - 26 October 1996, Euston, London), sponsored by the Institute of International Visual Arts. A series of satellite exhibitions, installations and events occurring simultaneously in ‘non-art’ sites in the Euston area during the autumn, 1996, it combines new commissions and work, not previously seen in the UK, by fifteen international artists.

As reported in *The (Glasgow) Herald*, “Yoko Touches Bottom as Town Takes Cheek to Heart,” November 1, 1994, p. 4.


*This is Not Here* is also the title of Ono’s 1971 exhibition at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, which also featured *The Blue Room Event*.


From the album *Some Time in New York City* (1972, EMI Records), lyrics © 1972 Ono Music.


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