

Woman of the World

KEVIN CONCANNON

Emerging within a New York art world intrigued with Asian philosophy and aesthetics, Yoko Ono established herself as a major player in the nascent Fluxus movement. Inspired to create what would become the first concert and performance series of its kind in Lower Manhattan, Ono rented a loft in 1960 for this purpose. Immediately joined in this venture by La Monte Young, she co-produced the influential Chambers Street series. Operating within a matrix of experimental artists and composers, Ono presented both concerts and visual art exhibitions from the very start of her career. Moving sometimes indistinguishably between art and music, Ono's unique sound and vision has fascinated audiences throughout the world. Her peripatetic family background—a childhood spent traveling back and forth between the United States and Japan—has positioned her notably between Eastern and Western cultures.

Ono had her first solo gallery exhibition at George Maciunas's AG Gallery in New York in July 1961. Some of the works featured written instructions alongside their realizations. *Painting To Be Stepped On* (1961), for example, was a piece of canvas on the floor that viewers could walk over. It referred to Japanese *fumie*, religious pictures on which suspected Christians were required to step, symbolically renouncing their (Western) religious beliefs. Ono redeployed this usage from Japanese history as a challenge to the conservative tradition of easel painting.

In 1962, she returned to Japan, performing and exhibiting at Sōgetsu Art Center in Tokyo. Her exhibition there featured *Instructions for Paintings*, texts hung on the wall and presented not as calligraphy, but as conceptual works to be completed in the minds of viewers. In 1964, she published the first edition of her classic book of instructions, *Grapefruit*. Returning to New York that September, she told friends she was “going home.”

It was at her first London exhibition, in 1966, that she met John Lennon, with whom she would regularly collaborate (and ultimately marry). Their *Bed Ins* and *War Is Over!* campaigns of 1969, innovative works spreading their message of peace, brought performance and conceptual art to their widest audiences ever.

Over several years during this period, Ono made a series of works in the mediums of mail art and magazine advertisements, in addition to performing and exhibiting. *Hole To See The Sky*, for example, created as a concept in 1964, was initially realized as a postcard in 1971 and packaged as an insert in her *Fly* LP of that year (Pl. 16.2). (The work will be realized again for *Making a Home*.) The

sky pieces, which date to the earliest years of her career, remind us that regardless of national borders, the sky is something we all share—something that connects us.

After a major retrospective at the Everson Museum in Syracuse in 1971, Ono presented a relatively low profile as a visual artist and made a series of inventive pop records. Following Lennon's death in 1980, much of her energy was devoted to managing his legacy. In the late 1980s she re-emerged as a visual artist.

Ono has stated: “All my works are a form of wishing. Keep wishing while you participate.” Since 1996, *Wish Trees* have often been featured in Ono's exhibitions (Pl. 16.3). “As a child in Japan, I used to go to a temple and write out a wish on a piece of thin paper and tie it around the branch of a tree. Trees in temple courtyards were always filled with people's wish knots, which looked like white flowers blossoming from afar.” In April 2007, her city-wide project called *Imagine Peace*, which included a billboard, was launched in Washington, D.C. *Wish Trees*, part of this campaign, then became part of the Washington D.C. Cherry Blossom Festival, challenging a new generation to use the power of positive wishing to realize the “unfinished work” for which we are all responsible. A new *Wish Tree* is featured in the current exhibition as well.

Ono, however, is not blind to the realities of our present situation. *Freight Train* (1999–2000) consists of an actual German boxcar, approximately 18 feet high and 38 feet long (Pl. 16.1). Through a large hole in its roof and bullet holes that riddle its walls, an intense light from within shines toward the heavens, like so many dematerialized spirits. A haunting soundtrack, concluding with the sound of chirping birds, gives voice to the spirits within. Based on a news story of Mexican immigrants left to die in a boxcar in the desert after being smuggled across the border into Texas, the work suggests another 20th-century tragedy: the Holocaust, specifically the trains that brought victims to the death camps. Ono describes it as “a work of atonement for the injustice and pain we've experienced in this century, expressing resistance, healing, and hope for the future.”

**PLATE 16.1**

Yoko Ono

Freight Train (installation view in Berlin, Germany)

1999–2000

Freight car with bullet holes, searchlight, engraved text in German, Japanese, English, and Spanish

Soundtrack: atmospheric music with percussion and vocals by Yoko Ono; 16 minutes looped

Train: approx. 14 x 38 x 10' (4.15 x 11.6 x 3.15 m)

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PLATE 16.2

Yoko Ono

A Hole To See The Sky Through

1964/1971

Offset printing on card stock (postcard), die-cut hole 3 1/4 x 5 3/4" (9.4 x 14.6 cm)

Courtesy of the artist



✕ **PLATE 16.3**

Yoko Ono
Wish Tree (installation view at *EnTrance*, 1997)
1996
Living tree, wishes written by viewers on paper tags
with string in pen, printed instructions
Lonja del Pescado, Alicante, Spain
Courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive
PHOTO: MIGUEL ANGEL VALERO

What does New York mean to you?

It's where I gave my blood, sweat and tears. It's my home. Y