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A peacenik forever

Yoko Ono's conceptual, media and performance art with husband John Lennon is focus of exhibit opening Friday at Mary Schiller Myers School of Art at UA

By Dorothy Shinn
Beacon Journal art and architecture critic

IMAGINE PEACE.

No, it's not an invitation for President Bush. Nor is it a call to stage sit-ins or other 1960s-style protests against the war in Iraq.

It's a billboard, and you may have already seen it on East Market and Prospect streets in downtown Akron.

If you've paid close attention (and have good eyesight), you might also have noticed that below "IMAGINE PEACE" in smaller letters is "yoko ono 2007."

For those of you older than, say, 40 (or anyone who watched Larry King interview Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr and the widows of George Harrison and John Lennon last Tuesday), that should be a pretty big hint.

The sign relates to the University of Akron's summer exhibit at the Mary Schiller Myers School of Art. *Yoko Ono Imagine Peace, Featuring John & Yoko's Year of Peace* opens Friday in the Emily Davis Gallery.

Using Yoko Ono and John Lennon as a vehicle to explore the sometimes obscure worlds of Happenings and conceptual, media and performance art, exhibit curator Kevin Concannon has focused on the collaborative artwork of the well-known couple.

Concannon, UA associate professor of art, is also the author of *Nothing IsReal: Yoko Ono's Advertising Art*, one of the essays in the book *YES YOKO ONO*, which accompanied an exhibit that toured the United States and Canada in 2000-01.

Ono's career in art didn't begin with her association with Lennon, however. In the art world, she is widely known as an early practitioner of performance art, conceptual art and Happenings.

Her works haven't all been of the mind. Throughout her career, she has created objects and paintings, some of which Concannon displays in this show.

Focusing on the ideals of peace and love, the UA exhibit follows the work of Ono and Lennon chronologically as solo artists and as a couple in the 1960s. It also includes recent solo works.

Recent installations Ono specifically wanted to include in the show are, according to Concannon, "consistent with the message of peace that has been a hallmark of her work since the early 1960s, and are designed to help visitors spread the message of love and peace worldwide.

"Yoko has gone to pains to say that this 'For Peace' campaign is not against anything," Concannon added. "It's just 'For Peace.' That's all it is."

Ono's installations help visitors spread that message through the use of stamps, postcards, flashlights and buttons.

The works include the white chess piece *Play it by Trust*, (1966/2007), where visitors are confronted with a large garden chess set arranged on a monochrome chessboard, both

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sides in white, so that after a few moves, players can no longer tell their own pieces from their opponent's.

By the way, Lennon met Ono in 1966 at the Indica Gallery, where she was showing a smaller, table-size version of the white chess set.

A little background

Born in Tokyo in 1933 to a prestigious banking family, Ono received disciplined training in classical music, German lieder, and Italian opera. She attended an exclusive school, and her schoolmates included both Japan's current emperor, Akihito, and Yukio Mishima, the novelist who committed ritual suicide to protest Japan's Westernization.

Her family moved to San Francisco when she was 2, but returned to Japan before the outbreak of World War II. During the war, her family lived in the countryside, and she often talks about "being hungry in the country."

By the time she entered Gakushuin University in 1952 as its first female philosophy student, she had been swept up by the intellectual climate of the avant-garde in postwar Japan. This movement was characterized by a spirit of rebellion against authority, a yearning for self-expression and a desire for spiritual freedom in an environment devastated by war.

Disillusioned with academic philosophy, Ono left Japan to join her family in New York. She soon gravitated to the vibrant art community of lower Manhattan, where non-Western cultures, especially those of China and Japan, were inspiring new forms of artistic expression.

A loose association of these artists was eventually formed under the name Fluxus. The group experimented with mixing poetry, music and the visual arts through a wide spectrum of activities, including concerts and exhibitions.

Concannon said Ono was the first person to have a loft for performances in Manhattan. Avant-garde figures such as John Cage, George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Andy Warhol and Ornette Coleman all collaborated with her.

In the decades since, Ono has expanded the boundaries of her art in a wide range of media.

After her marriage to Lennon in 1969, she collaborated with him on a number of projects in music, creating a bridge between avant-garde and rock in releases such as *Two Virgins* (1968), *Wedding Album* (1969) and *Double Fantasy* (1980).

Their Bed-Ins for Peace and the billboard campaign *War Is Over! If You Want It* were landmark projects created to promote world peace, a continuing theme in their work together.

Advertising as art form

Imagine Peace (2007) consists of several works: the message on billboards, demonstrating Ono's ability to co-opt or intervene in the medium of advertising to use it as an art form; and the "IMAGINE PEACE" stamp visitors are encouraged to use to print the message on maps attached to the gallery walls.

This last iteration of *Imagine Peace* turns the gallery space into the antithesis of a War Room, and participants into "peace generals," designating locations where they want peace to break out.

Onochord (2004) consists of an instruction video, the *Onochord Documentary*, and a supply of instructional postcards and keychain flashlights.

Participants are asked to use the flashlights to beam the message "I Love You," using Ono's variation on Morse code, the *Onochord*: one pulse for "I," two for "Love" and three for "You."

Imagine Peace Tower is the ultimate expression of this series, in that it extends far beyond the gallery walls, billboards, posters, postcards, T-shirts and rubber stamps to circulate the message.

The *Imagine Peace Tower* is under construction in Reykjavik, Iceland. When finished, the 60-foot-high column of light will contain in its base some 900,000 wishes for peace collected during the past 11 years by Ono from around the world. It is to be lighted on Lennon's 67th birthday, Oct. 2.

On the face of the tower will be engraved the lyrics to Lennon's song *Imagine*, itself inspired by Ono's instruction pieces.

A mailbox for the monument will be set up in Reykjavik to continue accepting wishes for the tower. Postcards pre-addressed to Reykjavik will be available in the gallery.

The exhibit also features screenings of Ono's films; the Lionsgate film *John Lennon vs.*

the U.S.A.; the photo-documentation of the worldwide broadcast of the Beatles' *All You Need Is Love*; and a free, public presentation by UA graduate intern and gallery assistant John Noga (with Ono's permission) of her classic 1964 performance art work *Cut Piece* at 7 p.m. Aug. 29 at the Akron-Summit County Public Library Auditorium.

The classic anthem *All You Need Is Love* was written by Lennon for the program *Our World*, broadcast on June 25, 1967, the first international live satellite telecast, the London portion of which was televised from Abbey Road recording studios.

"The studio audience included pop stars such as the Rolling Stones and Marianne Faithfull," Concannon writes in his catalog essay for the show.

"Several participants paraded through the studio carrying signs that featured the word 'love' in multiple languages, giving the event the flavor of a love-in and launching for many what would be known as the Summer of Love. Only a few months later, Ono would be hailed as the 'High Priestess of the Happening' by the Liverpool Daily Post."

Cut Piece hails from that era and is among Ono's best-known performance works.

"When *Cut Piece* was performed in London in 1966, it was seen as an anti-war piece," Concannon said, "especially in relation to the Vietnam War."

For the Akron performance, audience members will approach the stage one at a time to cut off a piece of the performer's clothing. When all pieces designated for cutting have been cut off, the performance is over. Noga said he doesn't plan to end up nude, but hasn't decided yet where he'll stop the cutting.

Also part of the show is the billboard display, which will be in three East Market Street locations: in July at Prospect facing east; in August at Broad; and in September at Prospect facing west.

The show also features a collectible, limited edition boxed-set catalog, posters, flashlights, postcards and "Imagine Peace" buttons.

The exhibit will open with a free, public reception from 6 to 10 p.m. Friday at Folk Hall, 150 E. Exchange St., Akron.

Dorothy Shinn writes about art and architecture for the Akron Beacon Journal. Send information to her at the Akron Beacon Journal, P.O. Box 640, Akron, OH 44309-0640 or dtgshinn@neo.rr.com.



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ABOUT YOKO

Yoko Ono is popularly known as the person who broke up the Beatles, but exhibit curator Kevin Concannon, a longtime Ono devotee, says that rumor is and always has been hype.

"The Beatles had already reached the point of breakup," when Yoko and John became an item, said Concannon, who has followed Ono's career assiduously.

"Ringo was the first to quit on 20 August 1968, during the White Album sessions," Concannon noted in an e-mail. "He returned 3 September. He intimated that Paul was overly demanding.

"George quit 10 January 1969. He also felt that Paul was treating him as an inferior. Obviously, he ultimately returned. He also indicated that Yoko's constant presence was creating tension. John quit on the 20th of September 1969, but his manager and Paul convinced him not to announce it because of business reasons.

"In April of 1970, Paul released his first solo record and announced the breakup of the band. Lennon felt betrayed -- and that McCartney had used it to promote his own solo record after convincing Lennon to keep quiet.

"But really, it was a simple case of 'those wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine.' They had been together 10 years, and they just grew up.

"Yoko was a convenient scapegoat for many people. But to credit her with the destruction of the Beatles gives her credit for an awful lot of power.

"Anyway, Yoko fans to this day claim that McCartney regularly picks fights with Yoko to get press for his newest records. Last (Tuesday) night (on Larry King's show), they were quite friendly, and the Ono lists are buzzing about that. It's all really quite silly.... "

But fascinating, Yoko watcher or not.



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