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whitehot | November 2011: Yoko Ono: IMAGINE PEACE at the University of LaVerne



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Yoko Ono: IMAGINE PEACE, Installation View 2011, University of La Verne Harris Art Gallery

Yoko Ono: IMAGINE PEACE
University of La Verne Harris Art Gallery
November 7 - December 15, 2011

While technically not a part of the Pacific Standard Time family -- which occupies some five dozen venues and explores art made in LA from 1945-80 -- this timelier than ever exhibition fits right in. It is cut from the same zeitgeist-cloth of action, Fluxus, installation, durational performance, political engagement, appropriation of mass communication media strategies, and empathetic conceptualism that defines the best of what PST has to offer. Although it originated at the University of Akron, curated by Kevin Concannon and John Noga with Ono's active and ongoing involvement, the laid back insistence of its homemade aesthetic, its emphasis on direct action, soul of humor, and preponderance of documentation of fleeting non-object works -- not to mention the centrality of its anti-war message -- belong as much to the history of mid-20th century Los Angeles as anywhere.

The exhibition has a feeling of complicity and continuity, though it is comprised of areas of work by Ono and Lennon operating as solo artists and as a couple in the 1960s -- including installations of John and Yoko's Year of Peace that are designed to help visitors spread the message of love and peace through the distribution of ephemera, like the iconic black and white IMAGINE PEACE buttons; and also includes a selection of Ono's recent solo works. Among the latter -- and among the most powerfully communicative objects in the show -- is her over-sized chess board, Play it By Trust. Recalling Ono's penchant for painting everyday things white in order to refocus our perspective on their universal and symbolic qualities, the board is a visceral reminder that it's impossible to fight an enemy who is indistinguishable from yourself. Moreover, that we are all ultimately connected, the same, rendering the fundamental adversarial stance of war absurd and untenable.

The map-based works, in which viewers are invited to festoon various territories with "Imagine Peace" stamps, feature locales which are chosen anew by Ono for each venue to which the show travels -- the better to focus on the issues in play in the societies of each stop, as well as concurrent events at the times of display. LaVerne ended up with economic and immigration hot-spots in California, alongside Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. It was not hard to imagine earlier incarnations of the piece featuring Viet Nam and Cambodia. Lennon's singular visual tenor was well represented by lithographs from the [Bag One Portfolio](#), a sweet and poetic series of drawings Lennon made for Ono to celebrate their wedding.

The chess board, quirky Beautiful-Losers style lithographs, and map works are not the only things whose character of peaceful rebellion is right at home in the contemporary landscape. The Occupy Movement may even have learned a thing or two from the couple's pro-peace Bed-Ins of 1969. Their planned light-tower peace monument recalls the temporary first Ground Zero monument; and the "War Is Over!" newspaper ad and billboard campaign could well have been conceived and executed just this week. Last summer's citywide "[How Many Billboards?](#)" project put on by the MAK Center, as well as numerous other instances of the now-rampant practice of sanctioned artist takeovers of billboards by organizations like Clock Shop, LAXART, and etc., have made this sight fairly familiar -- making it easy to forget just how radical an act it was when it was first undertaken. Ultimately the show proves that although it is difficult, it is not impossible to create objects that succeed both as pure art and as potent action.

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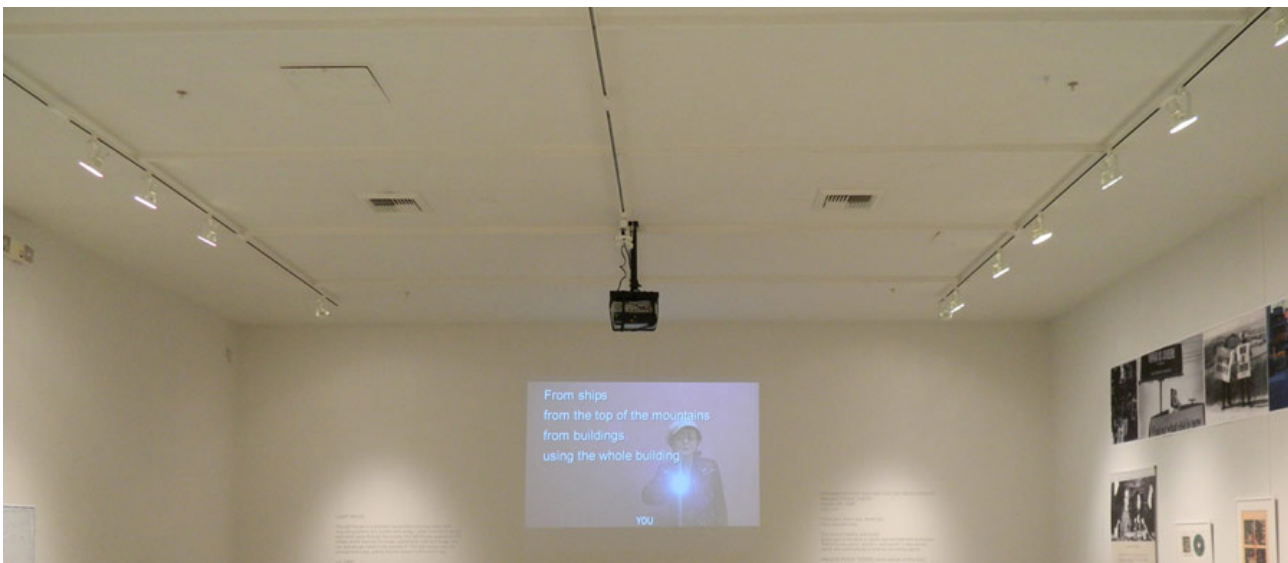
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Whitehot's LA Editor Shana Nys Dambrot is an art critic, curator, and author based in Los Angeles. Her writing has appeared in regional, national, international, and online publications including the LA Weekly, Artkrush, Daily Dose, Modern Painters, Art Review, Artweek, Art Ltd, ARTnews, The Believer, tema celeste, Angeleno, Art Asia Pacific, Coagula, THE Magazine LA, and Juxtapoz. She was the Managing Editor at Flavorpill.com until late 2010, where she continues to contribute to its NYC and London editions, and is currently LA Canvas Arts (and Books) Editor. Her monthly blog, Urban Scrawl, lives at Createfixate.com, and a full account of her activities is periodically updated at sndx.net.

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