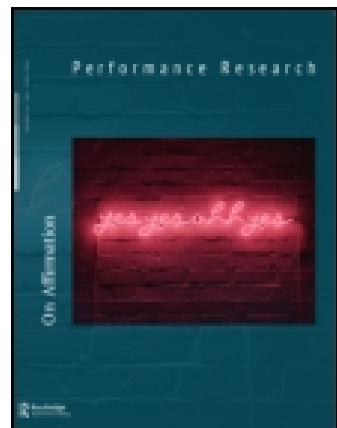


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Yoko Ono's Dreams

The power of positive wishing

KEVIN CONCANNON

Yoko Ono has often stated, 'A dream you dream alone is just a dream, but a dream you dream together is reality'.¹ From the legendary story of her first meeting with John Lennon in 1966, in which he climbed the ladder of her *Ceiling Painting* (1966) at London's Indica Gallery, picked up the magnifying glass and saw the word 'yes' written on the ceiling, to her 2007 *Imagine Peace* light tower in Reykjavik, Iceland, Yoko Ono has consistently expressed her faith in the power of positive wishing.

Known for her early text-based conceptual pieces (as well as her performance pieces and object works), Ono's conceptual deployment of text alone to constitute a work of art precedes that of many of the primary figures within the genre. Specifically, she exhibited *Instructions for Paintings* (text-only pieces) at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo on 24 May 1962. These *Instructions for Paintings* were made to stand as works in and of themselves. More than twenty-five 'instruction paintings' were exhibited.² Because they were also 'instructions', similar to a musical score, Ono left the realization of these works to the viewer. While some could be realized in material form, should an ambitious gallery-goer so wish, several of these 'instruction paintings', such as *Painting to be Constructed in Your Head*, could be realized only conceptually.

PAINTING TO BE CONSTRUCTED IN YOUR HEAD

Go on transforming a square canvas in your head until it becomes a circle. Pick out any shape in the process and pick up or place on the canvas an object, a smell, a sound, or a colour that came to your mind in association with the shape.

1962 spring
Sogetsu



With the *Instructions for Paintings*, Ono affirms the power of the viewer, not merely as an interpreter, but also as a co-creator of the work.

Among the best-known of Fluxus event works, Yoko Ono's early instruction pieces were first collected and published in her 1964 book, *Grapefruit*. Republished in 1970, following her marriage to John Lennon (and on several subsequent dates), the book is far and away the most widely known manifestation of Fluxus in popular culture.³ Generally characterized as events in the imperative mode, Ono's instruction works explore a variety of themes, sometimes imploring the reader to take real actions in the world, but always asking them to 'realize' the action in their minds.

Instruction works were featured in Ono's gallery shows regularly. Her 1967 Lisson Gallery show in London (variously titled *1/2 Life; Four Simultaneous Environments; 1/2 Life, 1/2 Space; Yoko Ono at Lisson* and *Half-A-Wind Show*), for example, included objects as well as instruction pieces. At Lisson, the text pieces took the form of an environment, *The Blue Room*, originally presented at Ono's New York apartment in early January 1966. As the artist describes it,

¹ See, for example, her song, 'Now or Never', released as a single in 1973, that concludes with this line.

² Several works realized as objects at the AG Gallery, New York, the previous year were included here as instructions, among them *Painting for the Wind*, *Smoke Painting*, *A Plus B Painting*, *Painting To Be Stepped On*, *Painting in Three Stanzas* and *Painting Until It Becomes Marble*.

³ She recently published what is effectively a sequel, *Acorns*, a new collection of instruction pieces originally published as a work with the worldwide web in 1996.

This was an all-white room. One was supposed to stay in the room until the room became blue. There were other aspects of the room that worked to expand your sensory perception. For instance, while you were sitting in it, you would notice that the floor had a little sign saying 'this is the ceiling'. You would notice that there was a sign on the windowsill that said 'this is 1000 ft. long', and you would notice a little sign on the wall that said 'you are not here' or 'this is not here'. (Ono 1985)

The Blue Room is perhaps less a set of instructions than a series of paradoxical declarations designed to encourage viewers to collaborate with the artist to transform the physical space of the gallery into an ethereal architecture of the mind. In their reconciliation of the empirical evidence and written declarations and instructions, the gallery visitors complete the work, each in their own way.

Ono arrived in London as an invited participant in Gustav Metzger's 'Destruction in Art Symposium' (DIAS), an invitation that hardly comports with the notion of affirmation. As Kristine Stiles, notes, however,

Ono's participation was key for Metzger, as her work related destruction to interpersonal, often intimate, human relations. Her quiet, self-contained, meditative approach to the very concept of destruction had a counterbalancing force for the heady machismo of male participants. Ono explained at the symposium that she did not understand the concept of destruction *if it meant that Japanese monks who burned their temples to prevent them from deteriorating were destructive*. 'People have to take off their pants before they fight', she continued, 'such disrobing is a form of destruction'. (2005)

This latter reference reflects Ono's belief that vulnerability mitigates aggression, and this idea was played out in several works over the years including *Cut Piece* (1964), a work she performed at the *Destruction in Art Symposium* to great acclaim. Ono herself discussed *Cut Piece* at length in a 1974 autobiographical essay written for a Japanese magazine:

For this event, I sat dressed on the stage, and the audience cut my clothes with scissors however they wanted. In the past, artists produced their

own work and then they showed it to the audience. When I want to give a present to someone, I give them something I really want to. And traditionally, the artist's ego is in the artist's work. In other words, the artist must give the artist's ego to the audience. I had always wanted to produce work without ego in it. I was thinking of this motif more and more, and the result of this was *Cut Piece*.

Instead of giving the audience what the artist chooses to give, the artist gives what the audience chooses to take. That is to say, you cut and take whatever part you want; that was my feeling about its purpose. I went onto the stage wearing the best suit I had. To think that it would be OK to use the cheapest clothes because it was going to be cut anyway would be wrong; it's against my intentions. (Ono 1986)

Cut Piece, too, affirms the audience's choices, transforming acts of destruction into acts of creation. Indeed, one of the most remarkable things observed in performances of *Cut Piece* is the audience's creative approaches to the act of cutting: cutting heart shapes, re-draping the performer, etc.

It was soon after these London performances of *Cut Piece* that Ono met John Lennon. The story of their initial meeting has been told in a few different variations. The story that Lennon preferred, however, suggests that he too saw in Ono's work an unusually affirmative sensibility. Speaking with talk show host David Frost in August 1968, Ono built the story of their meeting around an anecdote about her work *Hammer A Nail*. Lennon highlighted a different moment from that meeting:

That's her version. She was having a show at this gallery. I knew the fellow that ran it.... I had a bit of a hang-up about art having been to art school and dislike the high attitude of so-called artists. So anyway, I finally got to this show and she had all these hammer nail things and ... there was this ladder with a thing on the ceiling so I climbed the ladder and up on the ceiling it said 'yes'. So I thought I agreed then. It's OK then.... It said 'yes.' If it said 'no' I would've carried on with my preconceived ideas about art and artists - that they're all sort of yeah, yeah and sure, sure. But it said 'yes' and that was enough. (Lennon 1968)

Soon enough into their relationship the press would turn on Lennon and Ono, pursuing them

relentlessly, even as they sought to marry. Turning lemons into lemonade, though, Ono and Lennon transformed their honeymoon (25–31 March 1969) into a happening of unprecedented international significance, the *Bed In*.

Following their marriage in Gibraltar, the couple announced that their honeymoon suite at the Amsterdam Hilton would be open to the press from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. for the entire week. The press, many of whom assumed scandalous copy and titillating photo opportunities were on offer, took up the invitation. Instead, Ono and Lennon appeared in rather conservative pyjamas and spoke about peace for the entire week. As the *Daily Mirror* reported, ‘John and Yoko, who married last Thursday, took to their bed “as a protest against war and violence in the world.” They plan to stay tucked up for seven days’ (Anon. 1969a). Asked at the *Bed In* what inspired their Peace Campaign, Lennon replied:

Well, it built up over a number of years, but the thing which struck it off was we got a letter from a guy called Peter Watkins who made a film called *The War Game* and it was a long letter stating what’s happening – how the media is controlled, how it’s all run, but he said it in black and white, and the letter ended up ‘What are you going to do about it?’ He said people in our position and in his position have a responsibility to use the media for world peace. And we sat on the letter for three weeks and thought it over and figured at first we were doing our best with songs like *All You Need Is Love*. Finally, we came up with the bed event after that and that was what sparked it off. It was like getting your call-up papers for peace. (Ian 1970)

Ono had used print media on a number of earlier occasions as a medium for her conceptual art (Concannon 2002). Lennon, however, had considerably greater resources and a good deal of experience dealing with the media. The media would, in effect, become their meta-medium. While Ono had spent years affirming her audience’s collaborative creativity, Lennon’s experience with media had taught him that advertising can effectively promote positive beliefs within its targeted audiences. And when their attempts to bring the *Bed In* to the United

States were complicated by Lennon’s previous marijuana conviction, their mediated personae were unhindered by borders.

Ono and Lennon set themselves up at Montreal’s Queen Elizabeth Hotel between 26 May and 2 June 1969, recognizing that the media would project their message, not only to the United States, but also to the world. Ono told *Penthouse* magazine’s Charles Childs: ‘Many other people who are rich are using their money for something they want. They promote soap, use advertising propaganda, what have you. We intend to do the same’ (Childs 1969). Over the course of the week, scores of journalists and photographers, disc jockeys and celebrities visited the artists. Radio stations throughout North America took the opportunity to interview Ono and Lennon live from the *Bed In*. As the *Bed In* transpired in Montreal, anti-war demonstrators in ‘People’s Park’ in Berkeley seemed poised to engage with police; over a live radio transmission via telephone link, Ono and Lennon encouraged the demonstrators to take the path of non-violent resistance, going so far as to suggest that they simply leave the park if left no other alternative. It was also during the Montreal *Bed In* that The Beatles’ ‘Ballad of John and Yoko’ was released as a single. Still the most popular recording act in the world, with this single The Beatles became a vehicle to project the couple’s avant-garde activities to the masses. ‘Ballad’ refers to John’s and Yoko’s wedding, the Amsterdam *Bed-In* and their *Acorns for Peace* project in which they distributed acorns to world leaders ‘for peace’. Arriving on the airwaves and in the shops during the Montreal *Bed In*, the song further fuelled press attention.

The highlight of the Montreal *Bed-In* was the recording of the song, ‘Give Peace A Chance’, which would be released under the name Plastic Ono Band. Abbie Hoffman, Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, Dick Gregory, Tommy Smothers and dozens of others joined Ono and Lennon in their hotel suite to record this classic track as part of the week-long event. At the anti-war demonstration in Washington DC on 15 November 1969, one of the largest ever, folk singer Pete Seeger sang the song for

the quarter of a million people in attendance. As *Newsweek* reported:

Soon the entire assemblage was chanting the plaintive hymn – ‘All we are saying is give peace a chance’ – over and over. The peace movement had found an anthem.

Although surprised by the sudden emergence of the song as America’s peace anthem, Lennon calculated from the beginning to market ‘the product called peace’. ‘It’s got to be sold’, he said, ‘to the man in the street. We want to make peace big business for everybody.’

‘We might not have a leader’, one protester in Washington said last week, ‘but now at least we have a song – and a mass movement doesn’t go anywhere without a song.’ (Anon. 1969b)

After months of trying unsuccessfully to bring their *Bed-In* to the United States, Ono and Lennon launched the worldwide billboard and poster campaign, *War Is Over!* As activism colluded with performance art in the *Bed-Ins*, the *War Is Over* campaign employed the visual economy of the billboard and Ono’s conceptual strategy of empowering the viewer to complete the work. In London, New York, Los Angeles, Montreal, Toronto, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Amsterdam, Athens and Tokyo, the couple commissioned posters and billboards that declared in various languages: ‘War Is Over! If You Want It. Happy Christmas from John and Yoko.’

As the *West Lancashire Evening Gazette* reported, ‘Beatle John Lennon said from his Ascot, Berkshire, home: “This is part of our peace campaign. Our theme is that people have the power to stop things they don’t like. And wars must be the first thing.” The poster idea was Yoko’s he said’ (Anon. 1969c). The *War Is Over!* campaign adopted the form of Ono’s instruction pieces – a minimalist conceptualism – in which viewers ‘realize’ the work in their minds.

Just as the billboard and poster campaign had launched, Ono and Lennon flew to Toronto to announce a ‘Peace Festival’ that was to take place the following summer in Canada. En route, Lennon told reporters he would send the \$72,000 printing bill to Richard Nixon, adding

that the posters ‘cost less than the life of one man’, presumably in Vietnam (Herguth 1969). The press conference focused largely on the *War Is Over!* campaign.

‘You see, advertising is the game. We would like to make our campaign as you see the ads on TV. Every time you’d turn on the TV set, you’d see ads for peace.’ ‘If anyone thinks this campaign is naïve, let them come up with something better and we’ll join it. We’re artists, entertainers and this is our way.’ The Lennons argued that although the prospects for peace might appear bleak at times, there’s no reason to give up the quest. ‘We keep on with Christianity although Christ was killed’, he said, ‘and it’s the same thing.’ (Anon. 1970)

In March of 2003, with the Iraq War ramping up, Ono placed full-page ads in newspapers across the country, just as she and Lennon had in 1969. The message now, however, was *Imagine Peace*. Posters and billboards soon followed. A deceptively simple message, delivered on billboards, posters, postcards, badges, T-shirts and more, *Imagine Peace* exists as a seed, activated individually and collectively in the minds and actions of those who encounter it. Like much of Yoko Ono’s artwork over the past forty years, *Imagine Peace* is a work that is dependent upon a collective realization on the part of her audience. As is often the case with her work, this germinating idea is manifested in multiple variations.

Ono dedicated the *Imagine Peace Tower* in Reykjavik, Iceland, on 9 October 2007, Lennon’s birthday. At a ceremony announcing the project in Reykjavik in October 2006, she told a story about the work’s early development:

In 1967, John Lennon invited me for lunch at his Kenwood residence in England. It was about six months after we first met in my Indica Gallery Show in London. He told me that he read about the *Light House* in my publication and [asked] if I would build one for him in his garden. ‘Oh that was conceptual. I’m convinced that one day, it could be built, but I don’t know how to do it’. I said with a laugh. ‘Oh, I thought Americans came up with something’ was what he said. And that was that. I still marvel at the fact that John was touched by that particular concept in my catalogue, and forty years ago at that! (Ono 2006)

For her 1967 exhibition at the Lisson Gallery, she expanded the concept, listing it among ‘some practical and tangible future plans’:

The light house is a phantom house that is built by sheer light. You set up prisms and at a certain time of the day, under a certain evening light which goes through the prisms, the light house appears in the middle of the field like an image, except that, with this image, you can actually go inside if you wanted to. The light house may not emerge every day, just as the sun doesn’t shine every day. (Ono 1967)

When it was finally realized in 2007, sponsored by the City of Reykjavik, the Reykjavik Art Museum and Reykjavik Energy, the tower took the form, not of crystals, but of beams of light produced by geothermal power, and projected brilliantly into the sky above the island of Videy. Each 9 October, Ono lights the tower in a ceremony on the island. It remains lit through to 8 December each year, the anniversary of Lennon’s death. It is lit from 2 hours after sunset through to midnight each day (and again over the winter holidays).

Since 1996, Ono has collected wishes from around the world on her *Wish Trees*, regular trees installed with many of her exhibitions to which visitors are invited to attach their wishes on tags tied to the trees’ branches. Ono has collected more than a million wishes from these trees over the years, and will house them at the site of the tower. ‘*Imagine peace*’ is also the name of the artist’s website, imaginepeace.com. Using the website, anyone can send their wishes directly to the tower, where they will be projected in the pure light into the universe. In the spirit of co-creation that has defined her work for decades, she invites you to create your own *Wish Tree*, providing instructions along with the invitation on her website, where she also offers downloadable *Imagine Peace* posters and embeddable links that allow anyone to provide direct access to send wishes to the tower.

For more than fifty years, Ono has collaborated with her audiences all over the world to affirm the positive power of wishing and to build the collective dream of peace – a dream destined to become reality. She has

persisted in the face of doubt and optimism, but she is not in denial. In 2004, she shared an inspiring and affirming article by Howard Zinn with a group of friends by email:

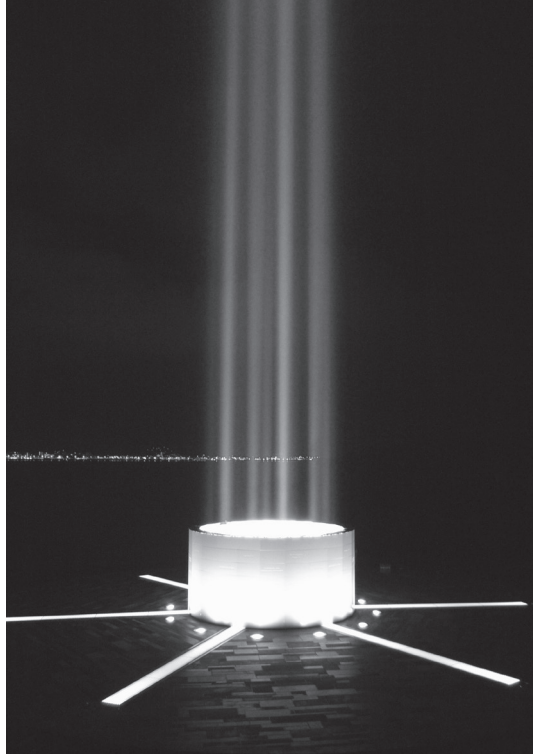
An optimist isn’t necessarily a blithe, slightly sappy whistler in the dark of our time. To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory. (Zinn 2004)

It is not only the positive power of wishing or the individual and collective capacity for creativity she affirms, however. It is the full range of human emotion. Ono’s work encompasses not only positive affirmation, but also an honesty that recognizes reality even as it seeks to transform it:

I really believe that we should not be hypocritical; I just ... tell the truth, which has so many incredible aspects and degrees of emotion. We shouldn’t smother or kill our emotions. They come out, yet still you can have an overall beautiful peaceful feeling. In fact we can achieve this beautiful peaceful feeling by creating it, by giving yourself that privilege. Our future is now. What we do now becomes the future. We already have the future in our lives; the reason is it’s not just a possibility but it’s something that is already there. We should make sure that we grow those things by carefully administering [them].... But if you don’t do that, then the other will be the future. So we are actually creating the future now. We have the ability to bring the future – whatever future we want.⁴

Ono has certainly been chided in the press for being what Zinn refers to as a ‘sappy whistler in the dark of our time’. In an overwhelmingly

⁴ Yoko Ono in conversation with the author, 16 September 2013, New York.



positive review of her retrospective exhibition *Yoko Ono: War Is Over! (If You Want It)* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, for example, critic John McDonald opined of the artist's behaviour at the opening celebration: 'Wearing the hat and sunglasses that have become her trademark in later life, the 80-year-old artist bounced around like a five-year-old at her own birthday party, saying lots of bizarre things in the most natural manner.' Yet he concludes:

The big question is whether we are amenable to such utopian sentiments any more. Many young people are far more concerned with their careers and lifestyles than with changing the world. One suspects this exhibition will provoke equal degrees of nostalgia and skepticism, but not inspire visitors to become politicized. Nevertheless, in our minds we are free to imagine a better world, or travel to the moon. For this youthful elderly artist a simple act of imagination will always be the most potent of revolutionary gestures. (McDonald 2013)

While it is most certainly scepticism that most informs this assessment, the writer acknowledges what Ono, Zinn and Lennon have before. 'A simple act of imagination will always be the most potent of revolutionary gestures.' A dream you dream alone is just a dream. A dream we dream together is reality.

Affirmation, for Ono, is a collective willing of the imaginary into reality, whether it be

the transformation of a square into a circle or the end of war. At its root, it may be as simple as our individual and collective capacities for transformation.

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