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LETTERS

WOOLY BULLY

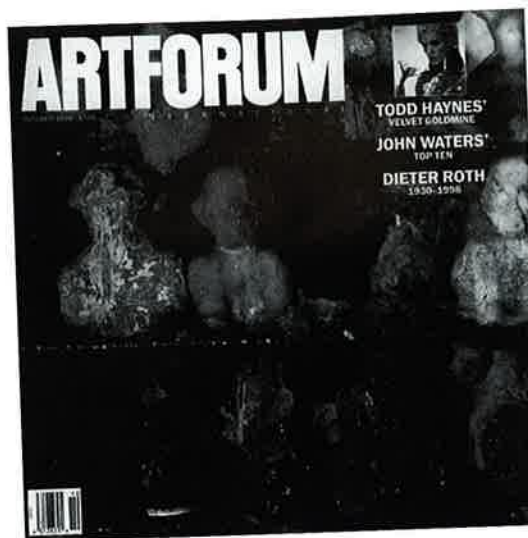
To the Editor:

Does Dave Hickey have a personal grudge against Christopher Wool? Or Ann Goldstein? His review of Christopher Wool's exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in the October issue of *Artforum* certainly seems like an attack on both of them and on anyone who actually thinks Mr. Wool is a talented, worthy artist who is saying something unique with his paintings right now (and not just "ten-years-ago").

Mr. Hickey writes that he felt he "was looking at the wrong art, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and that it was being recommended to [him] for the wrong reasons." My response to the show was exactly the opposite. I have never been so moved by an exhibition. Mr. Hickey says we need to feel the artist's purpose in our bodies and not be told what to feel by a curator. Standing in front of a black painting from the mid-'80s, I was breathless from the absolute perfection of the piece. I felt it in my body and, although the curator had selected it and thus may be trying to guide me in some way, I was thankful to see this piece since it is rare to see one of Wool's early paintings in person. And other paintings from ten years ago still had an intense impact, such as the powerful *Apocalypse Now: Sell the House Sell the Car Sell the Kids*. It was strong ten years ago, it is strong now, and it remains pertinent with the approaching millennium.

Mr. Hickey implies that Wool's use of wallpaper stencils and rollers is no more than wallpaper or a conceptual joke of sorts. I disagree once again with Mr. Hickey. Seeing several roller paintings and works on paper together allowed the opportunity to reflect on the process of painting and the choice of materials and the many possible intentions of the artist. And I find it unfair of Mr. Hickey to assume that just because other artists have used "ornamental imagemaking" and wallpaper that it is somehow less important or valid when Mr. Wool also uses this context for expression.

The exhibition catalogue was also criticized by Mr. Hickey, and I think if he were to consider the body of exhibition catalogues by Mr. Wool, perhaps he would see that the artist uses his catalogues as an opportunity to reinterpret his work, to alter the results, to play with the audience. His catalogues are artist's books rather than simple reproductions of what is in the show. And, as a member of that audience, I appreciate these catalogues more than some other artist's catalogues because they are like having a piece of the art.



The point that Mr. Hickey makes about the "true occasion for this exhibition" being that a wealthy local museum supporter happens to own Wool's works is ludicrous. Find me a museum exhibition that doesn't include work from wealthy local collectors. It is all part of the exhibition and museum process. Museums have moneyed trustees who support artists and sometimes these works are selected for shows at those museums. Sometimes not. But to imply that a painting is only in the exhibition because some wealthy local person owns it is not taking into consideration the importance of the painting itself. And the painting in question, *Riot*, is far from a weak piece.

This exhibition gives people a chance to consider Mr. Wool's entire body of work, to see why he has been called by many artists and dealers I know a "painter's painter." Perhaps Mr. Hickey and I have very different expectations and talk to different people since all of the responses I have heard to this show have been quite positive.

I felt the curatorial choice to include early, rarely seen paintings (such as the spectacular black painting) and more recent multilayered and spray-painted canvases alongside the delicate works on rice paper was excellent. The lighting and the height of the space revealed the depth of texture for many of the works. I thought it was a perfect exhibition: It contained work for my every mood because Mr. Wool's work expresses all the sadness and humor and anger we all possess.

I just couldn't let Mr. Hickey's scathing review go by without letting you know that there are

people who disagree with him and who think there is a reason for a current exhibition of Christopher Wool's work.

—Claudia Carson
Norwalk, Connecticut

Dave Hickey responds:

My dear Ms. Carson:

I am delighted that you enjoyed Christopher Wool's exhibition at MoCA. I have no doubt that the works responded well to your thoughtful approach to them as paintings within the broader discourse of painting. As I suggested in my review, this seems the appropriate mode of address for work as nuanced as Wool's. Unfortunately, I was assigned to review the exhibition, not the individual paintings, which, in my view, were somewhat overwhelmed by curatorial agendas. So please understand that I did not dismiss Wool's wallpaper paintings as conceptual jokes. I suggested that if they are conceptual jokes, as a number of the catalogue's contributors infer, they are not very good ones. As paintings, they clearly have their virtues. Also, I meant no disrespect to the work or to its collectors by emphasizing its private popularity, I merely suggested that this private vogue has meaning and implication that might well have been addressed in the catalogue.

Finally, please know that I do not consider my review to have been particularly "scathing," nor do I have any personal grudge against either Christopher Wool or Ann Goldstein, neither of whom I have ever met. I have nothing but respect for them as fellow toilers in the serene vineyard of contemporary art. I just didn't like the show. I liked some of the paintings. Happens all the time. Thank you for your thoughtful response.

BALLAD OF JONES AND YOKO

To the Editor:

After reading Ronald Jones's review of the recent Yoko Ono exhibitions in your October issue, it occurred to me that it was perhaps misplaced in the Focus section and meant, in fact, for the Columns. Even as a reviewer, of course, Mr. Jones is certainly entitled (even expected) to offer his opinions, but generally these opinions have to do with the work being reviewed. In his putative review of Ono's tandem exhibitions at Emmerich and Deitch, however, Jones devotes most of his text to his apparent personal obsession with John Lennon, to whom he refers as "Yoko's creative ghost limb," claiming justification for this critical approach by putting

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Lennon's words in Ono's mouth. Jones states that "without John, the question of how well Yoko endures as a solo artist depends on whether it is possible to see her as a stand-alone, free of her self-imposed artistic dependency." This claimed "self-imposition," however, is supported by Lennon's quoted statement that "everything we do is together," not Ono's. And when Jones answers his own question by stating that it is difficult to "get to Yoko without John getting into the picture," he would seem to be addressing his own personal biases (although hardly unique among middle-age Beatles fans), which stand in the way of his ability to offer any insight or criticism of the work that was actually on exhibition.

To state that "whatever fascination circulates around [Ono's] work must grow largely from a fetish for the nostalgia of John and Yoko—a way of honoring the dead, and sustaining their collaboration through our only mortal link to John" offers little insight into Ono's work. But Mr. Jones can hardly be accused of pretensions to objectivity; he lets readers know right at the start that Ono came out of "the yawning indulgence that was the Fluxus movement, the sputtering bulb in the otherwise dazzling marquee that blinks: THE ART OF THE SIXTIES." Given his self-stated lack of sympathy with Fluxus, it is puzzling that he took on Ono's exhibitions to review. I can only surmise that his motivation lay in his own "fetish for the nostalgia of John and Yoko."

While readers of Jones's review could hardly be expected to notice, with the exception of a single piece dated 1971, all the work on exhibition was created either prior to Lennon and Ono's partnership (which began in the spring of 1968) or after Lennon's tragic death in 1980. While the Emmerich exhibition featured several rooms full of work, Jones managed to discuss only a single piece, the 1966 *Ceiling Painting (Yes)*, which he reminds us "was the first John saw by his bride-to-be." Aside from his own literal interpretation of *Ex It* as being about John and Yoko's inseparability, even in death, this is as close as Jones comes to making any case at all for Lennon's implication in this work. The "simplex spirit" that Jones ascribes to Ono's "work prior to John's death" is more appropriately descriptive of his review. This latter phrase points both to what is really at issue for Jones (a rock star's legacy) and his curious chronology of Ono's work. What Jones describes as "work prior to John's death" (*Smoke Painting*, 1961, and *Cut Piece*, 1964) is in fact "work prior to John and Yoko's first meeting."

His lack of familiarity (or even concern) with Ono's work is revealed throughout the review. For example, he describes John and Yoko's "early for-

ays into 'sound art,' " as "collaborative," apparently unaware that these early forays (presumably the 1968 *Revolution 9*) were preceded by several years by Ono's own recording work with tape composition for performance and vocalized film scores—documented from at least as early as 1961–64 (pre-Fab!).

Jones's real displeasure, of course, seems to be over a Macintosh advertising campaign that features an image of John and Yoko from the *Bed-In* (not in the exhibition). While Jones's discussion of the ad seems mainly focused on Lennon's overqualification to represent innovation, *Artforum* readers would, I think, be better served by a discussion of how this advertising intervention builds on Ono's earlier work. Her 1965 advertising intervention in the *New York Arts Calendar*, for example, offered "Circle Events," of various materials and sizes for sale at the fictional IsReal Gallery. This advertising-as-artwork-as-institutional-critique preceded those of other Conceptual artists (to whom this innovation has been attributed) by three years. This advertising intervention was followed by several other advertisement/artworks Ono placed in *Art and Artists* in the fall of 1966.

Jones concludes his review by mocking Ono's statement that "the idealism of the Sixties still exists," taking her to task for being "sentimental about an earlier and simpler time, a time when a *Bed-In* could mean something." I would argue that Jones's notion that the '60s was a "simpler time" is naive and that, in spite of his cynical assertion to the contrary, a *Bed-In* apparently still does mean something—certainly Macintosh believes so, or the corporation wouldn't have acquired the *Bed-In* photo for its ad campaign.

For Jones to spend a full page castigating Ono for work that "sits right on the surface" while talking all around the work—devoting considerably more commentary to her marriage, advertising deals, and album covers than to any work on view—is perversely ironic; the work itself is hardly addressed, not even its surfaces. I look forward to Jones's review of the *John Lennon Anthology*, and to reading about how difficult it is to consider his work without Yoko getting into the picture.

—Kevin Concannon
Richmond, Virginia

Ronald Jones responds:

Above all, Mr. Concannon should not be permitted to routinely call middle-age Beatles fans "middle-age Beatles fans." It is every bit unbecoming, and especially, I believe, toward himself.

And while his letter seemed overpolite given the passion he obviously holds for Yoko Ono's artistic contributions, I would like to notice that Mr. Con-

cannon's voice sounds like the sputtering preamble to Yoko's Declaration of Independence, and not from John Lennon's legacy, but from history itself. History, I am afraid, will not have it. In my review I was not spinning myth out of some indulgence I wanted to itch. I took my cue from Yoko and John themselves. The "collaboration aura" seems to be the way they preferred to leave it—preferring it enough to deposit a very deep impression on history by way of their allied words and artistic deeds. Mr. Concannon is clearly a buff when it comes to the history of John and Yoko, and that being the case, he and I can certainly agree that Yoko was present when John had to say what he had to say about their artistic inseparability; otherwise what could have been the point? And in turn, he and I can agree that she did not speak up then or later to contradict her husband—indeed, to the contrary, she consistently promoted their collaboration, even after his death. We have learned by example that Yoko does not hesitate to speak for herself, and she could have taken exception with John, but she has not.

Made painfully clear by the Emmerich and Deitch exhibitions is that, at the end of the day, what is of penetrating interest in all this are not her own (pre-1968) profoundly dreary works of art, nor their post-'68 efforts, but instead the collaboration John and Yoko worked so very hard to host. The plain question bobbing about in the wake of John's murder, and these exhibitions—which must be asked and answered before one proceeds—is whether Ono has managed to be productive on her own. She has not.

*One final note. The *Bed-In*, Yoko and John's give-peace-a-chance politics, came from the heart, and helped to rally a hippie youth culture to join the antiwar movement. And in another form the *Bed-In* has indeed survived all that; it does still mean something. In this sense it is true what Yoko says: "The idealism of the Sixties still exists," because, as we know too well, Idealism sells. In this most recent incarnation, it sold the nostalgia for "thinking outside the box" that Steve Jobs needed to merge with Macintosh's bounce-back image.*

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