

**YOKO ONO: ONE WOMAN SHOW**

Museum of Modern Art – New York

By Keren Moscovitch

“Yoko Ono: One Woman Show” strikes a fine balance between dark and light, cumbersome and ethereal, whimsical and sobering. Densely energetic, the exhibition carves a path through a decade of experiments and actions designed to shine a beam of interactivity into the quiet landscape of the artist’s personal consciousness. Visitors are invited to share in the artist’s childlike wonder and playful spirit, and are thus lured into games that surreptitiously assert her fiercely pacifist ideology.

The seeds for “One Woman Show” were planted in 1971, when visitors to the Museum of Modern Art attended what they discovered to be Ono’s unauthorized solo show and were greeted with the audacious news that the exhibition consisted of a jar of flies unleashed by the artist inside the museum in a radical unsanctioned performance. In some sense, the actualization of the current exhibition has been decades in the making, and marks a belated institutional endorsement of an artistic practice that, at the time, functioned as a disruption to the monolith of the art museum complex and the mainstream infrastructure that supported it. The danger of its current iteration is that a body of work of such gravity will be misconstrued in the present neoliberal environment in which commodification of even the most anarchic practices is par for the course.

A trailblazing pioneer of performance practice and the moving image, Ono’s early work remains fresh and lighthearted without lacking in weightiness. *Cut Piece*, a documentation of a performance in which visitors were invited to cut off pieces of Ono’s clothing as she sat motionless on the floor strikes a somber tone of vulnerability and violation. Though the piece is less sensational, perhaps, than the performances of some of Ono’s contemporaries, it nonetheless evokes a quiet distress that becomes all the more palpable in context of her more overtly political pieces such as *Bed-In* and *WAR IS OVER!* The sprinkling of such works throughout remind visitors of the essential role that Ono, along with her partner John Lennon, played in raising consciousness during the anti-war resistance movement of the 1960s and 70’s, but other works also carry a message of peace that is subtle at first but rises in pitch as the piece unfolds. In *White Chess-Set*, visitors are requested to play a chess game of all white pieces, discovering as they proceed that it is impossible to work against each other when everyone is essentially the same. The game thus becomes a discourse on collaboration and cooperation, as the capacity for co-creation overcomes the desire for conquest.



Yoko Ono. *Cut Piece*. 1964. Performed by Yoko Ono in New Works of Yoko Ono, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York, March 21, 1965. Photo: Minoru Niizuma. © Minoru Niizuma. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive, New York.

In addition to her actively physical methodologies, Ono deconstructs language in a way that a child might, earnestly looking for explicit meaning and action as well as rolling the sounds around on her conceptual tongue to tease out the words’ texture and flavor. Her lingual gaiety is most evident in *Grapefruit*, a series of instructions for actions published in a humble pocket-sized artist’s book graced with poetics, littered with absurdities and punctuated by linguistic disruptions. By inviting the consumer of the artwork into the art-making process itself and shedding light on the arbitrary nature of free play in creative practice, she questions the position of the artist in an individualistic, capitalist society and the role of institutions in sustaining the iconic stature of the genius.

Ono’s work drips with potentiality, as viewers learn to extrapolate upon mundane words, objects and works of art that are seemingly never completed. The true one woman show is the experience produced inside of a person who has been taught to see reality through a different lens, and traverses the world with that new knowledge in place, seeing poetry and performance on every corner. ■

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