

Yoko Ono: Emotions to Art

Yoko Ono is known to the mainstream world as the “collector of skies,” a Japanese woman who wrote strange music, and most infamously broke-up the Beatles. However, Ono is much more than the stereotypes the mainstream media placed upon her, and her story explains what sculpted her into one of the planet’s most intriguing women. A violent war that enveloped most of the globe molded this citizen of the world into an artist who wished nothing but peace for all. Ono’s artwork and music explored the ideas of a country at war full of oppression and despair while still expressing her hope and joy that all people could eventually live together in harmony.

On 18 February, 1933, Yoko Ono was born into a world of luxury. Her mother was Isoko Ono, a well-to-do woman with prestige and nobility in her family. Her father was Eisuke Ono, a man who held the position of a wealthy banker at the Yokohama Specie Bank. As a result, Mr. Ono traveled extensively to the United States and other countries.¹ Although this couple seemed to be ideal parents, her father moved to California two weeks before her birth, and she did not meet him until the age of two when the family moved there in 1935, causing an emotional disconnect with him.² The family found San Francisco a friendly area to settle during a state of unrest in their home country.

Japan began to expand its territory into other nations thus causing conflict in those regions, as well as others around the globe. Due to Japan’s location, the newly industrialized country looked to other lands to expand their island-nation. As Dr. Asakawa states, Japan’s “enormous increase of her population, along with an immense growth of her trade and industries,” resulted

¹ Murray Sayle, “The Importance of Yoko Ono,” JPRI Occasional Paper No. 18 (2000), <http://www.jpri.org/publications/occasionalpapers/op18.html>. 2.

² Steve Huey, “Artist Biography by Steve Huey,” AllMusic, last modified August 14, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/yoko-ono-mn000521704/biography>. 1.

in a more economic form of advancement.³ Though this expansion occurred in many Eastern Asian countries, such as Korea, China, and Vietnam, Western country's involvement in the conflicts became obvious to most individuals in those areas.

Comparable to other Western European countries, the United States faulted Japan for many of the occurring problems in Eastern Asia. Subsequently, the US President, Fredrick Delano Roosevelt, found Japanese expansion unfavorable and “froze Japanese assets in the United States and imposed a total embargo on oil and gasoline exports to Japan.”⁴ On 7 December 1942 Japanese military forces attacked Pearl Harbor and a handful of other American bases in the Pacific to hinder them from interfering with Japanese imperialism.

Consequently, many citizens who treated both Japan and the United States as their home, felt as if their status as “citizens of the world” made them feel displaced and lonely. The 1942 census stated that “one hundred and twenty five thousand Japanese people of ancestry or birth” lived along the west coast of America, and those numbers only came from those who participated in the governmental survey—it did not mention those who lived in the states for work or other reasons.⁵ Unfortunately, the United States Government found many Japanese people a threat to society and placed many in internment camps within the Western United States.

Due to the hostility in the US, Ono's family did not feel it was a smart decision to stay in a country other than their own; three years after their arrival, the family moved back to Japan while Eisuke stayed in the states to work. However, Ono's mother still feared for her husband's safety in the United States given that the US government propaganda perpetuated the idea that

³ Dr. K. Asakawa, *The Russo-Japanese Conflict*. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc, 1972) 1-2.

⁴ Donald L. Miller, *The Story of World War II*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc, 2001) 77.

⁵ Roger Daniels, *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991) 12.

Japanese individuals there could be dangerous.⁶ Although their father's safety remained a concern throughout the war years, being back on the island nation became even more risky for Ono's mother and the children as war was impending.

Terror and horror were brought to the city of Tokyo in 1945 where Ono was raised and educated. A massive air strike by US forces hit the surrounding suburbs of Tokyo, Shitamachi, on March 9th of that year. It continued through the tenth, killing more than one-hundred thousand people (equal to, if not more than those killed in the atomic bomb droppings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki).⁷ Ono's family survived in a bunker they owned that lay outside of the demolished urban area; however, Yoko's mother believed it would be even safer to move herself and her children to the rural areas of the country.⁸ In these lands, the bombings and raids were much less frequent due to the spread-out proximity of individuals and buildings.

Although the Onos lived out of harm's way in the countryside of Japan, their prestige made them outcasts amongst the lower-class farmers. Country-dwellers did not welcome those individuals coming from the city, and the Onos became no exception. They all ached from hunger, and Ono recalls playing restaurant with her brother—pretending they held some sort of food even when none existed.⁹ There are even records stating that the children sold their family's most prized possessions in order to barter for a morsel of food.¹⁰ A year later, the family moved back to the wreckage of Tokyo where they encountered a city completely changed. What once reigned over them as a powerful city, looked like piles of smoldering rubble.

Although Ono's family life seemed to return to its old ways, the demilitarization of Japan set

⁶ Sayle, 2.

⁷ James M. Lindsay, "Lessons Learned: The Firebombing of Tokyo," Council of Foreign Relations, March 6, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdAvWfVD5Fk>.

⁸ Sayle, 2.

⁹ Niel Beram, *Yoko Ono: Collector of Skies*. (New York: Abrams Books, 2013). 2-3.

¹⁰ Sayle, 3.

a different tone throughout the once confident and powerful nation. Due to the American occupation in her country, Ono and her family found themselves constantly surrounded by military forces. As US military walked down the road, both Japanese men and women bowed to men who once played a role as their rivals.¹¹ Military peoples and vehicles drove down once prosperous, large highways that the Meiji had used in the previous era.¹² All in all, the imperial Japan that prospered well before the conception of the United States now bent down in submission. Ono began to feel like a prisoner in her own home. She no longer felt welcome in Japan or the United States because she was different now. Ono was not seen as solely Japanese in America and solely American when she was in Japan.¹³ In later works she did with the group Fluxus, Ono portrays this idea of the other. Most members of the group, like her, were Asian and played on this idea of being an outcast in whatever society they were placed in. Ono, however, felt this way for many years as her life progressed.

By 1952, Ono moved from the American-occupied Japan to New York where her father's job brought him next. Her earlier love for music and the piano influenced her to study music at Sarah Lawrence College for the next three years despite her father's hesitation. Because he found refuge in being a talented pianist himself, he saw the music/ composer field as being "a field that's too hard for women."¹⁴ Ono's father was a talented man who understood the hardships of the business and did not wish that upon his daughter. To his dismay, Ono would not only become a musician, but would begin writing full compositions to the music she imagined.

¹¹ Michael S. Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory*. (New York: Routledge, 2001) 25.

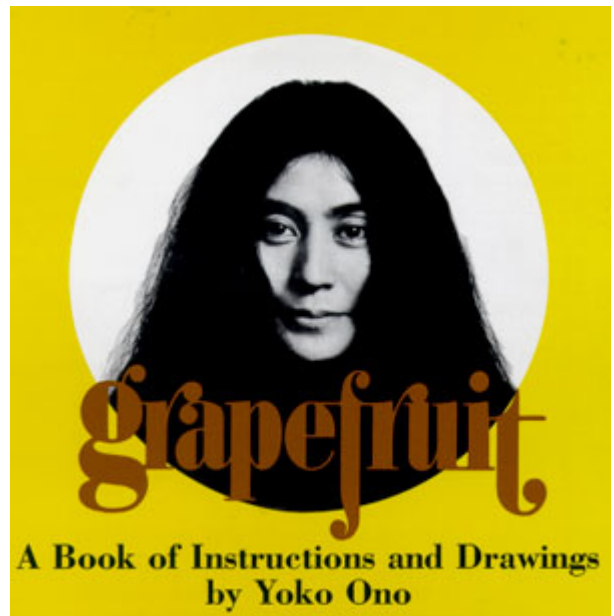
¹² Molasky, 25. "National Highway 58" linked Okinawa, Japan to all other national routes throughout the country. Because of that, the road became well-known for their military occupation. For twenty seven years, the highway was jam-packed with American Military vehicles. The example of "National Highway 58" shows the evasive nature of the American Occupation that lasted until 1972.

¹³ *The Real Yoko Ono*, directed by Ursula Madfarlane (2001), DVD.

¹⁴ Yoko Ono, interview by Melody Sumner, Kathleen Burch, and Michael Sumner, in *Guests to Go into Supper*, ed. Melody Sumner, Kathleen Burch, and Michael Sumner, 1986.

This deep tension between Ono and her father sparked her interest in feminism. Because of her father, Ono believed that the construction of masculinity caused many problems of war and violence in the world, and as a result fought against these two dangers.

Ono did not only study music in her early education, she was also an ex-psychology major at the Gakushuin University in Tokyo. As a result, Yoko knew how to play with individual emotions through the writings she did in her spare time. At her alma-matter Sarah Lawrence, she began to write poems and some novellas for her school newspaper, *The Campus*. One of Ono's first compositions that later intertwined with music was *The Grapefruit in the World of Park*, which got published in the paper in 1955.¹⁵ Ultimately, these short poems evolved into her greater work, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings* by Yoko Ono that would be her first real publication.



Her book was originally published in 1964. The book was composed of Ono's conceptual work that allowed her audience to portray the piece the way they visualized it. Yoko did not want her work to be set in stone; she longed for individuals to be involved in their world because life and circumstances are different for everybody. Although two individuals may come from different sides of the globe, both of them live under the same sky, in the same universe full of tiny people.

¹⁵ Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Women Artists in New York* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 81.

Art taught Ono to express herself not only about the two countries she personally felt equally apart of, but her greater world as well. Ono's childhood filled with war made her feel alone in a world that she once felt welcomed her with open arms. She was hurt and felt damaged, and accordingly, produced work about loneliness that later transformed into pieces about change and rebirth.

In her early years, Ono created her most powerful work about loneliness and submission which helped to introduce her as an intelligent female artist. Through her book *Grapefruit*, involvement in the Fluxus World, and then later her marriage to John Lennon, Ono brought her work to life by showing it to many individuals around the globe. By doing so, her idea of loneliness that was known by many after WWII got placed on center stage for everyone to see.

City Piece is one of Ono's instructional compositions that talks about loneliness and abandonment in a way that many of her other pieces cannot. It is as follows:

City Piece

Walk all over the city with an empty baby carriage.

1961 Winter

Like many of Ono's pieces of artwork, the single sentence seems innocent enough with a sense of humor tied to it. The surrealist piece gave off a sense of the absurd—many passers-by want to look in the baby carriage because of their curious nature, but when they glance in, there's nothing there. It gives off a sense of uncomfortableness, which is what Ono wants. Being lonely in a world full of people you feel you are connected to is not easy and at times, it is uncomfortable. Likewise, attaching *City Piece* to the artist shows the sorrow that Ono felt long after her years spent in Japan. Although her family surrounded her, Ono found herself feeling the effects of the loneliness she felt when she was exiled to the rural lands of Japan in the war.

Though Ono now considers herself to be a peace advocate and citizen of the world, she speaks in many interviews about her struggles growing-up and feeling displaced. Deep rooted fears she faced in her adult life came from her initial loneliness as a child. As Ono says, “I was always afraid; afraid of the dark, the night coming, because when I went to sleep, there were a lot



of nightmares.”¹⁶ She was always in busy, bustling cities with many people walking by, but Ono always felt alone, invisible, and scared. The empty baby carriage represents Ono for these very reasons. Always crowded, yet also feeling very empty.

Similar to Ono’s *City Piece* is a piece she entitled *Cut Piece*. When Ono conceptualized this piece of artwork, she wanted to show the subservience of Japan and at the same time show it through the views of a woman. When interviewed today, Ono says she sees “innocence” in the woman she was in 1964 when the pieces were played out in front of audiences.¹⁷ Her fears and loneliness faced during war times morphed into her greatest conceptual art pieces.

Ono did cut piece on multiple occasions between 1964 and 1966 at some of the most prestigious venues in the world—twice in Kyoto and Tokyo, once at Carnegie Hall, and two times at the Africa Centre in London.¹⁸ Almost ironically, Ono placed herself in countries that were the most involved during World War II because they felt the most anger and pain. These places became just as damaged as the people who lived there during the horrendous times. In

¹⁶ *The Real Yoko Ono*.

¹⁷ Miranda Sawyer, “Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece still shocks,” *The Culture Show*, August 3, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-radio-and-tv-18959341>.

¹⁸ Kevin Concannon, “Yoko Ono’s CUT PIECE: From Text to Performance and Back Again,” *Imagine Peace*. July 22, 2010, <http://imaginepeace.com/archives/2680>.

the piece, Ono sat subserviently like so many of these individuals in the center of a stage with an audience in front of her. She sat there in her nice clothing (wearing her most expensive suit the first time to risk what little she had) to show her equality to everyone else—Ono was the same as both the socialites of Japan, as well as the poor rural farmers in Japan when she was younger.¹⁹

Then, during her nine minute piece, she invited the audience to come up and cut as little or as much clothing as they wished as she placed the scissors slowly in front of her. This left Ono defenseless and helpless while so many individuals walked up to her kneeling on the ground with her hands placed down on the floor. As I mentioned above, Ono is considered to some as a feminist artist, and this is the very reason: she personified the helpless women in society becoming an allegory for many as the majority of individuals who walk up to her were men. They are men who make obscene gestures with the scissors and cut off much of her brassiere as well.²⁰ After cutting off most of her blouse, the last man leaves the stage and Ono remains there, submissive, yet powerful with her face straight out at the audience.

Although *Cut Piece* is seen predominantly as feminist, it also applies more broadly to those men and women who suffered from the war. Ono puts this piece in instructional form in her book *Grapefruit* and states, “The performer, however, does not have to be a woman,” suggesting that a deeper message lies within its context.²¹ Many women as well as men felt the pressures of the war. They felt lonely, afraid, and unsure of the future that war drugs them into. Like Ono after the performance, these individuals have scrapes and scars from a battle that they sat through because in the long run, it would benefit them and their country.

Mend Piece is one that ties together the effects of war and the solidarity of human life. It was a piece that Ono created in 1966 which was on display at her first solo exhibition in the Indica

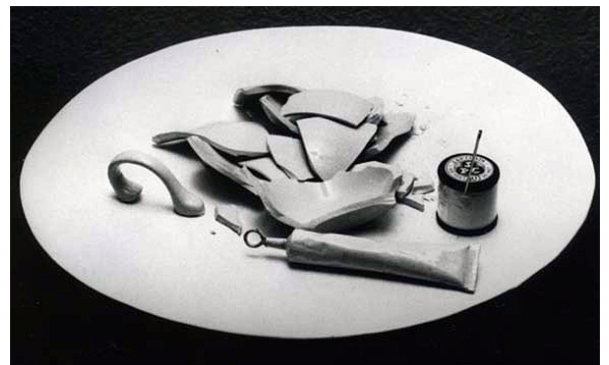
¹⁹ Jiuen Rhee, “Performing the Other: Yoko Ono Cut Piece,” *Art History*, 2005. 28.

²⁰ Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, directed by Yoko Ono, Carnegie Hall, New York, New York, March 15, 1965.

²¹ Ono, *Grapefruit*.

Gallery in London.²² Ono placed a smashed clay tea pot and saucer on display for her audience to come back and put the delicate art back together. It did not matter whether or not the pottery matched or put back together perfectly, but what did matter was everyone coming together to help make it whole again. This piece symbolizes a world community. When our world is torn apart, it does not matter where the pieces are rearranged, it only matters that we come together to help each other and make peace.

Ono felt the emotions behind this piece because she was shattered and broken from the many things that happened in her life. Only a few years earlier before this piece became a thought in Ono's mind, her loneliness and fragility caused unsettling thoughts in her mind. At the age of 29, Ono attempted to kill herself and was placed in a psych ward in a Manhattan hospital.²³



Many friends from the art-world visited her, including a man who would become her second husband, Anthony Cox.²⁴ They were in love briefly, and Ono found herself back in a place where nobody understood her. *Mend Piece*, however, explains her in a way that many individuals could relate to after seeing it. She was broken, like much of the world she belonged to, but she could be put together again like anything else. It may not be as perfect as it once was before, but with the help of a community, a shattered object could be put together again to be whole once more.

As Ono progressed in her career, she met a plethora of influential people, but the most interesting was John Lennon. Known by a large portion of the world, the guitarist and lead

²² Eiko Honda, "YOKO ONO: Mend Piece," *Imagine Peace*, Last modified September 9, 2008, <http://imaginepeace.com/archives/17077>.

²³ The Real Yoko Ono.

²⁴ Anthony Cox was only married to Ono for three years (1963-1969) and shared one child with her, Kyoko Cox. He thought she was beautiful and fragile like a flower and would often come to her room to give them to her.

vocalist of *The Beatles*, Lennon took notice to the new-age art Yoko created. At an exhibition she held in London in November of 1966, he took a bite out of a green apple she had on display as a piece of work.²⁵ Then-on, she was not fond of him; however, the more he came around, the



more intrigued the two were with each other and their minds—coming together as a couple, the two created a movement in the world called *Bed Peace*.

In order to create a non-violent protest for world-peace in 1969, Ono and Lennon came-up with a concept of a sit-in where the two would spend a week in their hotel room in Amsterdam. The first of the two bed-ins took place two days after their secret wedding, so was considered their honeymoon—their honeymoon for peace.²⁶

Though the concept seemed far-fetched to the many reporters and journalists that came to visit the new couple in their room, the general public understood the concept very well.

The subject was peace and it was an attempt to bring the community together to create it. John was the perfect spokesperson, and many interviews with the two pay most attention to him rather than Ono. In the recordings from *Bed Peace*, a cartoonist, Al Capp, was seen asking many questions to Lennon, but would avoid or disregard anything the young woman had to say.²⁷

However, John Lennon credited Yoko Ono for the concept and idea—in an interview with Anthony Fawcett Lennon said:

²⁵ The Real Yoko Ono.

²⁶ Anthony Fawcett, *John Lennon: One Day at a Time*, (New York: Grove Press, 1980)

²⁷ Bag Productions, “Bed Peace” May, 1969. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRjjiOV003Q>

“The actual peace event we staged came directly from Yoko. She had decided that whatever action she took, she took for a specific reason. Her reason was peace. I’d been singing about love, which I guess was another word for peace. Our actual peace demonstrations were Yoko-style events. They were also pure theatre. The Bed sit-in in Canada was one of the nicest ones, and I participated almost like a spectator because it was Yoko’s way of demonstrating.”²⁸

Regardless of what the media thought of Ono, she created much of the campaign without credit where it was due. Although she did not get much praise for her involvement, her idea went off without a hitch and she now had an attachment with the world she felt so lost from. She created a family with Lennon in a physical sense, but also in an emotional one. Involving herself in the peace movement, Ono could turn her theme of loneliness into one that spread hope for a greater future where everyone could be a citizen of the world.



Years later, in 2003, Yoko Ono re-created her iconic work, *Cut Piece*, in Paris.²⁹ Again, Ono invited the audience to join her on stage to cut off as much or as little clothing as they wished. She sat in a long black dress on a chair in the center of the stage as her scissors sat at her feet. Although the performance was very similar to the ones she performed in the 60s, many cultural changes affected the work. She talked to many of the performers, though it is clear that most of the individuals coming on stage knew her and

²⁸ John Lennon, interview by Anthony Fawcett, *John Lennon: One Day at a Time*, 1975.

²⁹ Michael Bracewell, “Yoko Ono: THÉÂTRE DU RANELAGH, PARIS, FRANCE,” *Frieze*, November-December 2013, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/yoko_ono1/.

took this as a chance to make small talk. However, the way her clothes were cut off seemed more violent, as our culture has grown to see this as more of the norm. Ono's clothes are cut off at a fast pace until she is completely down to her undergarments.

Re-performing *Cut Piece* seemed like the proper thing to do in the midst of the war in the Middle East. Ono's work is timeless, and this work in particular shows the power behind her performance. The world has become an even more violent place, and peace is needed now more than ever. Though she talks to the men and women who confront her on stage, she still remains sitting, and at times, helps the audience in their path of destruction. The world we live in makes us blind to the damage we do to ourselves, though we sit there and remain silent. Our eyes need to be reopened to the terror and destruction around us.

Yoko Ono had witnessed war, sorrow, and depression; however, she is a woman who perseveres and uses her work in a self-less manner. Through her interactive pieces, Ono shows the world that it needs change by showing what's wrong with society. Her interaction with many of the wars since WWII shaped her into an artist—one who longed to change humanity so it would not have a sad life like that of her early years. Though she has come to peace with who she is and what she's been through, Ono still longs to make a better world to live in and her pain has helped us do such.

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