



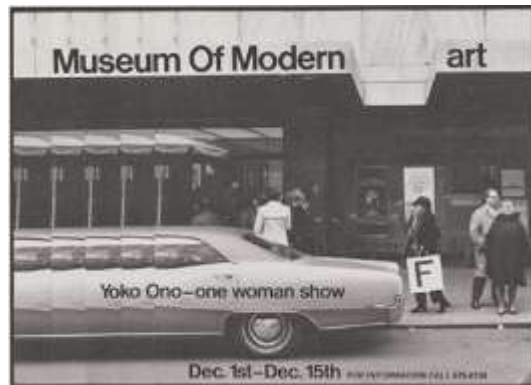
Yoko Ono with Apple (1966), at press preview for *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971*, on view at MoMA, May 17 – September 7, 2015. Photo: Ryan Muir © Yoko Ono
<http://blog.sculpture.org/2015/07/08/uncovering-yoko-ono/>

Yoko Ono One Woman Show 1960-1971
 New York: MoMA, 2015. 240 pages.

It is thrilling to see that Yoko Ono’s early contributions to innovative art and world peace are being recognized by MoMA’s Yoko Ono One Woman Show exhibit and catalog and frustrating to think that MoMA is celebrating its own history – by selecting Ono as other women are kept on the margins or excluded.[i] Before I sing the praises of the catalog, it is important to notice its cover – Ono posing in front of MoMA. Her upstage hand shows a two-fingered peace sign and her downstage hand holds a big brown paper shopping bag with a huge F. However, this photo erases the original photo and context: on November 25 and December 2, 1971, Ono she took out Village Voice ads announcing her conceptual “Yoko Ono –one woman show” — on a sign attached to a limo in front of MoMA. She altered MoMA’s name to “Museum of Modern (F)art” (p. 208). Ono’s show, minus the F(art), is up, 44 years after she conceived it. It contains work from 1960 – 71 and beyond whereas the original show was a large “body-sized” bottle of scented flies released in the MoMA garden.



Cover image: Yoko Ono One Woman Show 1960-1971. New York: MoMA, 2015. 240 pages.



Yoko Ono Museum of Modern [F]art. 1971. Exhibition catalogue, offset, 11 13/16 x 11 13/16 x 3/8"
 The Museum of Modern Art Library, NY. © Yoko Ono 2014

At the MoMA press conference, Ono posed for a flurry of cameras before she sat down to hear comments from MoMA Director Glenn D. Lowry and Curators Klaus Biesenbach and Christophe Cherix. She seemed frail at 83, but I later read that her dance moves are still hot[ii]. The appearance that the artist was used to others seeing her as an object was reinforced by Mr. Lowry’s first remarks that this

show came about only “Thanks to the extraordinary generosity of Gilbert and Lila Silverman, a trove of significant works by Ono was added to the Museum’s collection in 2008, allowing us to increasingly position her art in dialogue with that of other figures working in the culturally rich years of the 1960s.”[iii] The artist seemed to agree with Klaus Biesenbach that she has been mostly unknown for 40 years. The 125 objects in the exhibition comprise a mostly white show about the years 1960-71 (see my closing Postscript on this) and a rare few from the last 40 years of Ono’s life.

Has the focus on early work let Ono overcome her “unknown” status? The catalog fully documents Ono’s early artistic creations and collaborations. As Holland Cotter points out, the exhibition is “essentially an archival display” (that)... “consists mainly of works on paper. And most of those carry words, the outstanding example being the 151 hand-typed note cards that, in 1964, became Grapefruit: A book of Instructions and Drawings.”[iv] Two Grapefruit pages:

Cut Piece

Cut out any portion of a painting you like or a piece of paper and throw it off a high building. (1962 summer)

Collecting Piece I

Break your mug into pieces by throwing it on the wall. Collect the pieces and put it together again with glue.

You may break many mugs at one time. (1963 autumn)



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

Two favorite works of mine are *Film No. 4*, 1966-67, which consists of a series of 360 nude buttocks (pp. 166-7) and *Bag Piece*, 1964, which involves two people under a black bag. The original bag act involved nudity – undressing and dressing again under the bag, but this is not mentioned in the bags available for use at MoMA. *Half-A-Room*, a series of domestic objects cut in half and painted white, was shown at the Lisson Gallery, London, in 1967 (pp.170-1). Clive Phillpot suggests, “This concept is likely to have had its emotional origins in Ono’s marital split” (p. 154) [from her second husband]. Yoko Ono had met

John Lennon in London in 1966, and John and Yoko had a collaborative work in the 1967 exhibition. Lennon became Ono's third husband in 1969. None of this is mentioned in the exhibition.

The 240-page catalog closes with Ono's all caps 2015 message "SURRENDER TO PEACE." The artist's original approach to visual and collaborative arts and her early activism in the peace movement includes the "Bed-In" anti-war protests in 1969. The catalog rotates among essays by curators and collaborators, including Francesca Wilmott, Christophe Cherix, and Klaus Biesenbach, all from MoMA, and Midori Yoshimoto, Jon Hendricks, Clive Phillpot, and David Platzker; selected press clippings; and small excerpts titled "Yoko's Voice." In one of the latter, Ono's December 1971 letter to George Maciunas tells him that she deserves co-credit with La Monte Young for producing the Chambers Street Loft Series and he shouldn't "talk about what you don't know" (p. 70). In another passage, Ono describes an all-night event in Kyoto at Nanzenji Temple and then expresses how important it is to recognize the mind's complexity as well as the need to always keep the mind clear and uncluttered "like a bright mirror" (my paraphrase, pp.146-7). Ono's philosophy of oneness and "Strawberry Fields Forever" goes beyond the 1960-71 timeframe as do a few works in the exhibition. Why aren't there more passages like this showing Yoko Ono's voice? In contrast, troves of Louise Bourgeois' spoken and written words were accessible before and after her death[v]

Two more points: unlike Yayoi Kusama's work, which MoMA has featured, this is a conceptual, philosophical exhibition with few visual "wow" items.[vi] One catalog essay sparsely notes that Ono lived in Tokyo in 1945 when the city was leveled by American bombs (Yoko was 12); it does not examine what this means and how/why Ono left Sarah Lawrence College in spring, 1956, around age 22, married composer Toshi Ichyanagi, and began her art practice. Was her Japanese heritage discriminated against in the US (where she and her family now lived) during and after World War II? Finally, mentions of John Lennon in the exhibition do not adequately address Yoko's and John's roles in each others' lives. As in the catalog's re-shoot of Ono's first concept "show," MoMA has restaged parts of Ono's history and art without examining it deeply or bringing it alive.



Bag Piece (1964) performed by Yoko Ono in Perpetual Fluxfest, Cinematheque, New York, June 27, 1965. Photograph by George Maciunas. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, 2008. © 2014 George Maciunas

What is notable is that Yoko Ono's art, along with the Fluxus Movement, was not unique. Creative expressions using nontraditional materials and processes proliferated from 1960 – 1971 — in St. Louis and Kansas City Missouri, San Francisco and Berkeley, California and many other locations. Anti-war and civil rights movements led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began in the deep South, in Washington, D.C., and on campuses like Cornell and the University of Wisconsin by 1962-1964 – before Ono began hers. The MoMA exhibition *Inventing Abstraction: 1910-1925* showed how the Dada/ Synchronist/ Synchronist/ Cubist/ Surrealist revolutions from St. Petersburg to Paris to Germany to New York before, during, and after World War I surged with new ideas. Similarly, Ono grew up surrounded by feminist, civil rights, gay rights (Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* to note two books that challenged censors and changed the world forever), Native American rights, and John Lennon. The MoMA curators give us a limited view of the contexts for Ono's arts. What issues of exclusion/inclusion did she face as a Japanese woman in America? Why did she keep doing *Cut Piece*, – in which audience members cut off her clothes — and what did this feel like? I, for one, want to learn more about the origins and underpinnings of Ono's spiritual and aesthetic practices, such as uncovering (opposed to discovering) the truth. How did Ono practice this?



Half-A-Room. 1967. Various objects cut in half, most painted white. Installation dimensions variable. Private collection. © Yoko Ono 2014

Postscript: Since finishing writing this, I've re-visited Ono's exhibition and read Lindsay Zoladz's *New York Magazine* essay on Yoko Ono. These answer some questions and teach me what Ono means by uncovering. Zoladz states that Ono's cut piece intended to teach participants about themselves; however, some cutters were aggressive or disrespectful, so each participant did not always gain insights into his/her behavior toward others. Yet this begins to show what uncovering means – unexpectedly raising consciousness.

I am also uncovering answers to my question about Ono's use of white. Ono says somewhere in the MoMA catalog that brides wear white and somewhere else that people may paint her white art as they wish. Zoladz's essay mentions that when Lennon bit into Ono's apple in 1966, he was Eve and she was Adam, and that Lennon and Ono both wore white at their wedding. Zoladz's historical contexts and comments help underscore my own sense that Ono is more like a philosopher using mixed media to express herself than an artist. For example, as far as I know, Rothko, O'Keeffe, and even Twombly each focus more on making visual art than on articulating their distinctive philosophies. It follows, too, that Ono's white chess set in the exhibition is a response to the chess fanatic Marcel Duchamp: an all-white

set changes the game. Instead of battling, both players are on the same team or at least coordinating their moves. White is a unifying blend of all colors; a symbol for peace, for light, and for Ono's philosophical art.

By Jan Garden Castro

[i] The Björk exhibit also at MoMA and the Ono show both have audio components, and in 2013 MoMA produced an experimental group show: *Soundings: A Contemporary Score*. MoMA clearly has its own strategy regarding its choice of women artists.

[ii] See "Yoko Ono and the Myth that Deserves to Die," *New York Magazine*: May 18, 2015 issue or this online version: <http://www.vulture.com/2015/05/yoko-ono-one-woman-show.html>. Zoladz applauds Ono's dance moves at the 2014 Grammys and often refers to Lisa Carver's book *Reaching out with No Hands: Reconsidering Yoko Ono*.

[iii] Foreword by Glenn D. Lowry in *Yoko Ono One Woman Show* (New York: MoMA, 2015).

[iv] Holland Cotter, "Yoko Ono, The Concept," *New York Times*, May 15, 2015: C28.

[v] See <http://blog.sculpture.org/2012/05/23/louise-bourgeois-the-return-of-the-repressed/> and <http://blog.sculpture.org/2012/04/25/louise-bourgeois/> and <http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag01/janfeb01/bourg/bourg.shtml>

[vi] Zoladz points out that Kusama staged a nude-in in the MoMA garden. This was in 1969 before Ono's 1971 conceptual show. See http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/10/09/yayoi-kusamas-return-to-moma/