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# Yoko Ono: A Reconsideration

By LISA CARVER

Yoko Ono is not pretty, she is not easy, her paintings aren't recognizable, her voice is not melodious, her films are without plot and her Happenings make no sense. One of her paintings you are told to sleep on. One of her paintings you are told to burn. One of her paintings isn't a painting at all — it's you going outside and looking at the sky. Most of her stuff is not even there. This is why I love her. This is why we need her. We have too much stuff already. It clutters our view, inward and outward.

We need more impossible in our culture. Go out and capture moonlight on water in a bucket, she commands. Her art is instructions for tasks impossible to complete. We already have a billion lovely things and a million amazing artists who have honed their talent and have lorded it above us. People who have achieved the highest of the possible. People wearing their roles as artist or writer or filmmaker or spokesman as a suit of armor or as an invisibility cloak or as an intimidatingly, unacquirably tasteful outfit.

Even other artists can't figure out Ono or accept her as legit, nor can she obey the club rules. Her stuff is all wrong. She tells you to spend a whole year coughing. Listen to a two-minute song of recorded silence, music lovers. As for you, the most imperialist and arms-profiteering superpower in the history of the world, give peace a chance.

**There are two** schools of art. One is what is made beautiful by the artist; the other is to make way for the viewer to see or feel what is already beautiful.

The first is to make something ornate and unreachably special with skills. The viewer or listener is awed, their belief regarding the order of things is confirmed and they are reminded by this unachievable beauty of their own powerlessness. And I do love

that kind of art, the beautiful kind.

The other way to make art is to tear down what's between us and nature, us and eternity, us and the realization that everything is already perfect. In this experience of art, the viewer or listener loses respect for the current order or arrangement of civilization and thus becomes powerful, like King Kong, and outside civilization, like God — or simply like the shuffling janitor who is pleased with his own work and sleeps well.

I always admired the Japanese use of negative space in decorating and the unspoken in conversations (or so I gather from old films). Ono uses the negative positively. She is a classically trained operatic student who uses silence or screeches in her singing; a recipient of coveted gallery showings who hangs unpainted canvases with requests for you to pound holes in them or to walk on them. She was the first woman admitted to the philosophy program at Gakushuin University in Tokyo, and could travel the world discoursing multisyllabically, yet instead she tries lying in bed and not lifting a finger to cure a war.

It takes an enormous lack of ego to *not* put your imprint on everything you do, to *not* employ your learning and position. To stand back, to hold back, to keep your mouth shut. To yell with your silence, when you know you very well could make soothing and welcomed sounds at the drop of a hat. She could sing; she knows how. And being a Beatles wife could have been a magic charm — but she wasn't interested. It takes willpower to overpower the will to power. To be accepted, to be thought nice, is traditionally woman's power. That is something Ono doesn't need.

She uses nonexistence in art, and she uses absence in her private life. Her first husband was the composer Toshi Ichianagi. They grew apart then flew apart. Her second husband, the film producer and promoter Tony Cox, same thing. Only he took their daughter, Kyoko, and hid with her, joining a religious cult.

At first Ono allowed her third husband, John Lennon, to do what came naturally to him: to hunt for the lost daughter through private detectives and the courts. Only after John's death, when Ono wrote an open letter to her grown daughter, saying how deeply she loved her but that "you should not feel guilty if you choose not to reach me" and that she would no longer try to locate Kyoko, did her daughter slowly come back into her life.

It's paradoxical, but it seems that when you accept loss, it loses its tenacity to stay lost. Ono wived by letting husbands go; she mothered her daughter by letting her go. Lennon got the urge to roam, and she told him: Go! Go roam! And he did, and then he called and said he wanted to come home, and she said, No, you're not ready. Ono believes in the right to drift. She didn't want to hold down and lay claim on human beings any more than she did her art and ideas.

Everything that has happened to Ono has caused her to become better at living outside of the culture (instead of trying to get in). She is out there in the lonely wide open — from being a silenced daughter to a war transplant to an expatriate to an unpopular artist to a feminist with few female friends to a lover blamed by the world for the breakup of its favorite band to losing her daughter to a cult to losing her husband to a killer. She manages all these losses and holds her ground. She is not swept away. She tries to find beauty, and she tries to find connection, and she knows the pain of loneliness that is in all of us even though we might not be aware of it. But she is aware, and she reaches to that place in us, she wants us to know it's O.K. We will be O.K. Everything is all right.

Ono has made a career and a life out of doing exactly what she was not supposed to do and not being what she was supposed to be. And when she does tell us what to do, it's the undoable. Because if you cannot do that, what else might you not do? The possibilities of the impossible are endless!

**So . . . if I** love her so much, why does this little old lady still make me so uncomfortable?

I am a huge Yoko Ono fan. I feel that what she does in art — tries to free people — is the most important thing you can do in life, period. And I love that she always does it, bravely, no matter who or what it goes against, no matter how much further her unusual and uncompromising methods might drive her from our bosoms.

Even now, at the most acceptable point her career or private life has ever reached in our moralistic and artistically anorexic society, who is embracing her? Courtney Love and Lady Gaga. And those women seem nuts. They're extreme. We all love to watch what they do next, but who really likes them? And while they catfight then make up and champion or co-opt other famous ladies, I never get the feeling they like anyone either. It's more like the lonely and the aggressive recognizing one another and choosing not to expend their energy trying to destroy one another. (Maybe I watch too many Godzilla movies.)

Back to Yoko Ono. I feel such intense appreciation for her, yet it is not a warm feeling. At some level I just don't understand her. It would please me so much if I could — it fills me with suppressed wariness that I don't. I don't judge anyone, yet I judge her. How could she sell the rights to make John Lennon-branded neckties? Or Lennon-themed children's clothes by Carter's? Doesn't she have enough money already? She keeps her own stuff uncommercialized; why not similarly protect her husband's legacy?

How could she not support Julian Lennon when he was not named in his father's will — he'd already been abandoned by his father in life; why make him abandoned in his father's death as well?

Why is she so wonderful in disinterested ways — communicating love to people she's never met, paving a hard path to peace inside and out for the loneliest of the lonely among us — yet sometimes so mean in a personal way?

I care about her. She puzzles me. There are areas where I wish she made different decisions, and it bothers me, but still I'm rooting for her. Then it bothers me that she bothers me; there's something wrong with me in that equation.

**Female artists in** our society (in every society?) have to be somehow accessible. Ono's not. Just when you think you understand her feelings on things, like when she put Lennon's smashed glasses on her album cover, you feel her vulnerability, you soften, then suddenly you find out she's been living with another man while she's been talking and singing about the murder of her husband, and you deem this disrespectful to both men. Then you feel guilty that you were intrusive about how a widow mourns or how an artist alchemizes pain. Then you step back, abashed, and then you're back to Square 1: She's not accessible. Not figure-out-able. She is so weird. She's not endearing.

So what's wrong with the fact that I can't relate to her? I don't relate to male artists or expect them to be my friends. It's all about the work. I don't need to examine the human being to admire what they created. Which is lucky, because male artists don't typically seem to let that — whether or not I imagine I would like them as people — get in the way of their work.

But women do let it get in the way. Men are allowed to express all kinds of things, and it is not thought of as impacting their ability to provide as fathers. Women, though — everything they think and do and are proves their worth or danger as mothers

and wives. But not with Ono. “Mothers are not supposed to give guidance,” she said in a 1998 interview, believing instead that children should do their own thing. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone before proposing mothers should not guide their children. How different. How refreshing. And Ono’s had to deal with kidnapping, deportation, assassination — yet she absorbs it all and still says what she believes is true, not what will make her look like a good woman to the public.

This is why, for me, Yoko Ono is the ultimate feminist. She isn’t fighting for women’s rights per se, but she expresses herself doggedly and with a single-minded purpose of art for art’s sake, truth for truth’s sake, and doesn’t seem to care what anyone thinks about her as a woman. Just as male artists do and we don’t think anything of it. She’s an artist, not a female artist. Her life — and those of the people around her — is a tool. She uses incredibly personal autobiographical details in her work, yet she doesn’t seem to feel any need for perfect factual order or to worry about anyone’s feelings. That quality is neither feminine nor masculine; it’s genius, which is always disturbing when peered at too closely but more so when it’s housed in the body of a woman, who should be maternal, who is supposed to be desirable, agreeable, likable.

That is the ultimate feminism: Yoko Ono doesn’t need us to like her. She doesn’t care.

Then sometimes I think she does care.

Oh, Yoko, you trouble me so.

*This essay was adapted from “Reaching Out With No Hands: Reconsidering Yoko Ono,” published this month by Backbeat Books.*