



Fluxus Perspectives

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Yoko Ono's Touch Piece: A Work in Multiple Media, 1960–2009

Kevin Concannon

I consider my shows like giving an elephant's tail. When a blind man says "what's an elephant", you lead the man to an elephant and let him grasp the tail and say "that's an elephant".

The existing material in the gallery is like an elephant's tail and the larger part is in your mind. But you have to give a tail to lead into it. The thing is to promote a physical participation that will lead you into this larger area of mind.

What I'm trying to do is make something happen by throwing a pebble into the water and creating ripples.

–Yoko Ono Facebook post, March 16, 2020

Yoko Ono's work is in the world. It's not here in the Museum. What we can do is bring traces.

– Christophe Cherix, co-curator, *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971*¹

Known primarily for her early text-based conceptual works and her proto-feminist performance work, Yoko Ono has incorporated haptic interaction (or interaction relating to the sense of touch) into her works in various media from the very beginning of her artistic career. This essay explores her many and varied uses of the haptic in a series of *Touch Poems* and *Touch Pieces* in various media—and various contexts—with vastly different receptions by her many audiences.

Among the artist's earliest known works, her first series of *Touch Poems* (fig. 1) was produced in the form of small booklets. Originally made in 1960, the *Touch Poems* were first exhibited in January of 1962 at New York's Living Theater. In *Touch Poem # 5*, for example, lines of tape replaced text, and clumps of different hair glued to the pages were treated as illustrations (fig. 2). At first glance, they appear to be Braille texts. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that there



Fig. 1. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem # 5*, 1960. Photos: John Bigelow Taylor. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 2. Yoko Ono, Touch Poem # 5, 1960. © Yoko Ono
Digital image © 2014 MoMA NY.

is nothing to be read in the tape (at least in any conventional sense); it is (relatively) smooth. Though the lines imply a narrative text, it is an opaque language. Similarly, the clumps of hair, in their different textures and colors, imply many different things. Only the barest hint, however, is given as to what. Is there a cast of characters, one a redhead and another with black hair? (The black hair is, in fact, Ono's own.) Or is it talismanic? Its impenetrable mystery at once begs and defies any definitive interpretation. Perhaps more importantly, in the way language per se is withheld, the *Touch Poems* foreground other sensory information, thus encouraging in the viewer a heightened awareness of the nature of perception itself and of the viewer's own role in constructing meaning from *sensory* as well as *extrasensory* data.

According to the artist,

I was thinking about braille. Braille is a very interesting communication method in which you use "touch" to get information. It may create a deeper intake of the information with touch rather than casting your eyes to the

words. I thought of creating poems you take into your body by touch. [A] Poem is a way of limiting the information of the Universe by framing it. So I thought of framing poems without words for people to get it by touch.² [...] It bridges the conceptual and the sensory.³

Language, in fact, became central to Ono's next exhibition. Having returned to Japan in the spring of 1962, shortly after first exhibiting the *Touch Poem* booklets in New York, Ono performed a concert and exhibited her *Instructions for Paintings* (text-only pieces) at the Sogetsu Art Center. *Painting to be Constructed in your Head*, for example, instructs us to: "Go on transforming a square canvas in your head until it becomes a circle. Pick out any shape in the process and pin up or place on the canvas an object, a smell, a sound, or a color that came to your mind in association with the shape."

The program also lists *Touch Poems*.⁴ While the literature has focused on the *Instructions for Paintings*, Midori Yoshimoto clarifies that other works were shown in this solo exhibition as well, stating that it "included, among other works, the artist's *Touch Poems* and *Instructions for Paintings*."⁵ For this concert and exhibition, however, the announcement (fig. 3) itself is a touch poem. Headed "Works of Yoko Ono," it lists the works to be performed and exhibited in a column of full-justified type, with no spaces between the words, the words themselves cut off arbitrarily at the end of each line and picked up on the next. Immediately to the right of each line, random telephone numbers are embossed (but not printed), one telephone number per line, running down the entire column, subtly alerting recipients to the multi-sensory nature of the performance and exhibition. These embossed telephone numbers at once suggest Braille and, literally, lines of communication—telephone lines. In the pre-Internet world of 1962, telephone communication was a uniquely magical medium, allowing average people to connect virtually over extraordinary distances. The immediacy of verbal communication in the absence of physical proximity created a strangely disjunctive experience. The implicit demand for the reader's touch in Ono's *Touch Poems* and embossed exhibition announcement foregrounded the peculiarly virtual nature of telecommunication through this oddly haptic representation of an otherwise ephemeral communications medium.



Fig. 3. Yoko Ono, Works of Yoko Ono invitation card, 1962. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 4. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem for a Group of People*, 1963, winter, 1964. From *Grapefruit*, 1964. © Yoko Ono

In her art, Ono often aspires, not for a direct message, but rather to plant a seed that is nourished by the viewer, nurtured and fully formed in his or her own mind. In the case of this 1962 invitation, Ono realized the concept of the seed quite literally, inserting into each envelope a sprouting soybean along with the printed and embossed announcement.

“I threw all the soybeans in a bathtub with some water in it and made it into *moyashi*. And it started to grow a little. And I put in the envelope that bean that was growing/half-growing. It was to touch that indented place in the invitation. But the seed that was half-growing was a beautiful thing to touch really.”⁶

Thus, at the very moment she introduces a pioneering text-based conceptual practice (and these *Instruction Paintings* are recognized as among the earliest examples of what we now generally refer to as conceptual art⁷), Ono is producing insistently haptic works. And as is often the case with Ono’s work, the *Touch Poems* would be re-imagined into conceptual works, performances, songs, and other manifestations as well; it was indeed a

TOUCH PIECE

Touch.

This piece was performed many times in different places in Europe, United States and Japan. Usually, the lights are put off and the audience touches each other for ten minutes to sometimes over two hours. In Nanzenji Temple in Kyoto, 1964, it lasted from evening till dawn. In London, people started to whistle the theme song of "Bridge of River Kwai" during the performance which became a chorus.

Fig. 5. Yoko Ono, *Touch Piece*, from *Grapefruit* (1970 edition).
© Yoko Ono

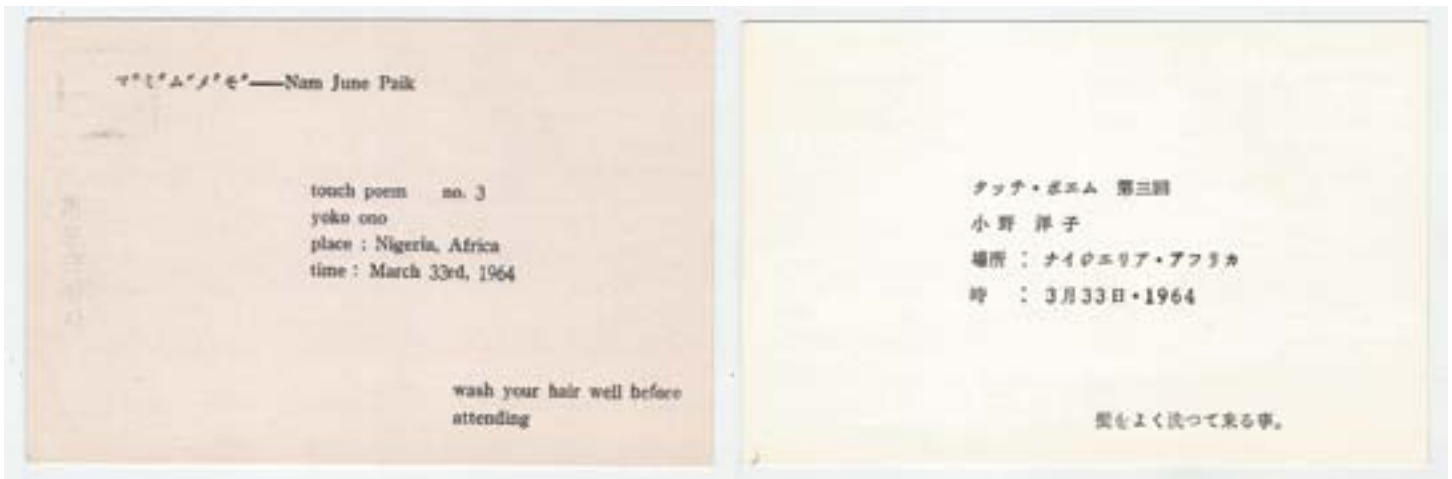


Fig. 6. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem no. 3 (for Nam June Paik)*, 1964. © Yoko Ono

seed. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, for example, Ono performed *Touch Poem for a Group of People* (1963) (fig. 4) in various contexts. The instruction, first published in her 1964 book of instructions, *Grapefruit*, simply states: "Touch each other."⁸ In a later publication of *Grapefruit*, in the "Information" section, Ono included another variation, *Touch Piece*, with the simple instruction, "Touch" (fig. 5), noting that this piece was performed many times in different places in Europe, the United States, and Japan.⁹ "Usually the lights are put off and the audience touches each other for ten minutes to sometimes over two hours."¹⁰

In a program note for a September 1965 performance at the 3rd Annual Avant Garde Festival in New York, Ono offered a brief history of the work, first the object and then the performance:

Touch poem was first exhibited in the lobby of the Living Theater in New York City on January 8 '62 in the evening of AN ANTHOLOGY. It was

then exhibited at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo for the evening of WORKS BY YOKO ONO. *Touch Poem*, the audience participation piece, was first performed in NAIQUA GALLERY, February 1964. Since then, it was performed in Kyoto, Nigeria, Berlin, Florence, Aachen, and New York.

Ono describes not only the object and performance manifestations of *Touch Poem* here, but actual—and *purely imaginary*—performances as well. The Kyoto and New York citations no doubt refer to performances that she herself gave in those cities. Midori Yoshimoto notes that in early 1964, Ono performed *Touch Piece* at Naiqua Gallery in Tokyo, in which she and other participants "sat in a circle and touched each other in silence."¹¹ The Berlin, Florence, and Aachen references correspond to performances of the piece given by her friend Charlotte Moorman on her 1965 European tour with Nam June Paik. The Nigerian performance, however, is imaginary, and refers to a postcard event from 1964, *Touch Poem No. 3* (fig. 6).

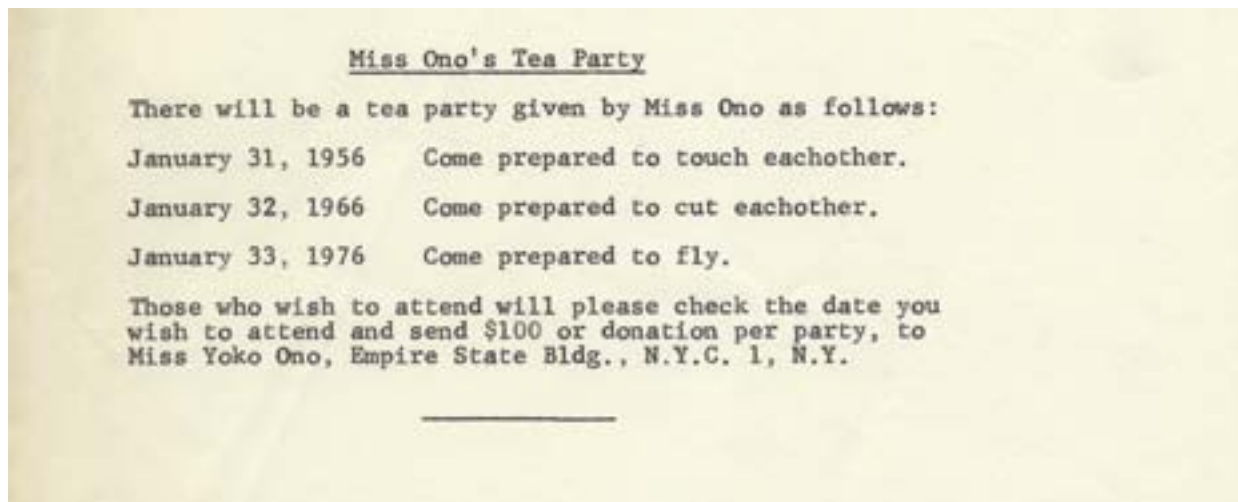


Fig. 7. Yoko Ono, *Miss Ono's Tea Party*, 1966. © Yoko Ono

Touch Poem No. 3 exists in two versions: English and Japanese. While it appears to be a simple announcement card, the date of March 33rd 1964 suggests otherwise. The quote attributed to Nam June Paik is actually an unpronounceable phrase written in katakana syllables. Explaining Paik's quote, Ono stated:

It has to do with communication on a different dimension. It is very important that we shouldn't always think that our communication is on one dimension. There's another dimension where it's not communicable in the sense that we're used to. But nevertheless it communicates. Nam June Paik was a very close friend of mine. I really respected him. By the way, he really loved *Touch Piece*. He thought it was a great piece. So I felt good about making a tribute to Nam June. I think he would be one of the very few people who would understand the reason I did it that way.¹²

Another imaginary version is included in a card piece from 1966, *Miss Ono's Tea Party* (fig. 7). For the January 31, 1956 party, the artist instructs: "Come prepared to touch eachother." As with a number of iterations of this score, "each" and "other" abut one another typographically. Ono's *Grapefruit* also includes a score for such fictional versions.

Touch Poem III

Hold a touch poem meeting at somewhere
In the distance or a fictitious [sic] address
On a fictitious [sic] day.

1964 Spring
(fig. 8)

An earlier version, dated to Summer 1963 and simply titled *Touch Poem*, also appears in *Grapefruit*:

Touch Poem

Give birth to a child.
See the world through its eye.
Let it touch everything possible
And leave its fingermark there
In place of a signature

i.e., Snow in India
J.C.'s overcoat
Simone's equilibrium
Clouds
Etc.
(fig. 9)

This version, except for the title, is identical to a text that appears under the title *Instructions for Poem No. 81* on a sheet dated to 1963 that serves as a birth announcement for Ono's daughter Kyoko that August and also an announcement for the forthcoming *Grapefruit* (fig. 10). Here her daughter's handprint—or touch—connotes her very identity. Another iteration dated to 1963 Autumn instructs the reader to haptically explore her environments (fig. 11).

Touch Poem V

Feel the wall.
Examine its temperature and moisture.
Take notes about many different walls.

On March 13 and April 2 of that year, at the Naiqua Gallery in Tokyo, the instruction was realized as a participatory performance.¹³ Midori Yamamura and Reiko Tomii report that, according to filmmaker Takahiko Imura, some



Fig. 8. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem III* and *Touch Poem IV*, 1964 spring, 1964. From *Grapefruit*, 1964. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 9. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem*, 1963 autumn, 1963, 1964. From *Grapefruit*, 1964. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 10. Yoko Ono, *Birth Announcement*, 1963 © Yoko Ono



Fig. 11. Yoko Ono, *Touch Poem V*, 1963 autumn, 1964. From *Grapefruit*, 1964. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 12. Yoko Ono, *Tickets for Three Kyoto Events/Evening Till Dawn*, 1964.
© Yoko Ono

participants, while initially tentative, soon “found their own ways of expressing the act of ‘touching,’” and they “all awakened [their] sensations by touching, which was rarely an issue in the art world.” Nam June Paik kept in touch by phone and, according to Iimura, “used the ringing sound [...] to touch the participants.”¹⁴ For Paik, too then, his touch was activated though electrical transmission, perhaps especially fitting for an artist who had transitioned from musician to art-robot maker to the world’s best-known video artist. (Curiously, this calls to mind Ono’s announcement for the 1962 Sogetsu Art Center event with the embossed telephone numbers.)

Paik himself discussed this performance of *Touch Piece* in 1970:

Touch Poem

At one time and one place, one fatal disaster was about to happen.....centering around Yoko..... at this extreme situation, the phrase that was inspired paradoxically was a romantic word. “Touch.”

In 1964, at the Naiqua Gallery in Shinbashi, one small premier was conducted. I was unable to go since I got a cold. So, I processed the sound of

Ring Ring by telephone as a Series-style (Tone-series-style), and touched, from this side, with only signal sound without having the other party pick up. In accordance with a popular word in the previous year, this must have been so-called “McLuhan-style participation”, mustn’t it?

Later, during the German performances with Charlotte Moorman, I brought this piece with me; it was applauded everywhere. This was meant for all of the audience members to caress one another.¹⁵

Later in 1964, as part of a three-day program that also included a concert and a symposium, Ono secured the famous Zen monastery, Nanzenji, for an event she called *Evening till Dawn* (fig. 12).

On the night of a full moon, approximately fifty people—mostly Kyoto residents, but also some American and French participants—gathered at the temple gate, where each was given a card with the instruction “silence.” Walking quietly to a garden behind the temple, they received another instruction card, “touch,” and spread themselves throughout the garden, the verandah, the corridor, and the tatami-mat rooms. Interpre-



Fig. 13. Yoko Ono, *Touch Piece at the Electric Garden*, London, May 28, 1967. Photo: Ross Benson. "Covent Garden Goes Electric," *London Look*, June 10, 1967, 12-13. Courtesy of Mikihiko Hori.

tation of the instruction was left to the participants, although Ono explained to them that objects to touch were not limited to physical things. While some literally touched other participants' bodies, others watched the moon or sky, *wishing* to touch.¹⁶

The character of this performance was quite different. And Ono recalled: "the monks accepted and greeted my work with a very Zen attitude themselves, without being on guard. The evening went so well because of this symbiotic vibration."¹⁷

While the location of a Zen monastery no doubt contributed to a more solemn performance in Kyoto, later performances took on characters all their own. At the aforementioned 1965 Festival of the Avant-Garde in New York, for example, the idea of touching each other provoked discomfort among participants. According to the artist: "People [were] very, very shy and extremely embarrassed and all giggling.... Everybody was giggling. [and] Men were extremely vocal in expressing their embarrassment."¹⁸

Ono would perform *Touch Piece* in London as well. One of these performances occurred on October 15, 1966 at the launch party for the underground newspaper, *International Times*. She would later explain the genesis of the piece to journalists for an article in the newspaper:

When I first thought of the idea [1958] I couldn't sleep at night because it was so beautiful. I was going everywhere saying to people, Did you

realize how beautiful it is to touch each other? And that was a long time before hippie or yippie or anything, right, it was 1958 when I first did that. I don't know how old you were in 1958 but people couldn't understand it. Touching just touching and then I made concrete object poetry that were to be appreciated just by touching them. They were my first touch pieces. It was then I realized that instead of touching an object it was better to touch each other [...].¹⁹

At a 1967 performance in a London nightclub, the Electric Garden, *Touch Piece* took on a very different character still. In a feature article on the opening of the new nightclub, *London Look* reported that Ono sent blindfolded participants (fig. 13.) into the crowd. According to the magazine, one girl said: "It's a nice way to meet people."²⁰ Ono told me: "I explained to the audience that [they] will be going around the audience to 'touch.' It was a touch piece but a fun one. [They] went around the audience behind them, and touched their butts."²¹

In August of 1968, Ono and John Lennon would offer *Touch Piece* to the audience of *Frost on Saturday*. As the program concluded, with the sounds of *Hey Jude* playing out the episode, Ono offered: "We're just trying to communicate. And communication itself is art, and art is communication. And so that, um, people are getting so intelligent that you don't have to explain too much, all you have to do is just touch each other, just shake hands, and so this is a way of touching each other." And in February 1972, when they were invited to co-host The

Mike Douglas Show for a week, they invited their first-day audience to “touch each other” as well. In the latter case, the video shows the participatory performance.²² Norma Coates, in her essay about the couple's takeover of Douglas's show for the week, notes that “Douglas was an able foil for Ono's feminist opinions, but her feminist art baffled him.”²³

The piece threatened propriety, especially since Ono told audiences to just put their hand on the next person and leave it there. What could rile a sophisticated audience in a gallery could draw unwanted attention from television regulators, or angry phone calls and letters from offended viewers. Douglas seemed immediately and acutely aware that certain audience members might put their hands in the wrong places [...]. Douglas turned the piece into a comedy routine, running through the audience while shouting “touch touch touch touch,” as though at a football game. His humor reassured his regular audience and gave his cameras something to follow, yet it did not interfere with the purpose and intent of Ono's piece. It was a tacit recognition that he could not stop her.²⁴

If the Electric Garden performance reflected the Swinging London of 1967, six years later in 1973, another performance offered much the same content, but a very different context. By then a feminist activist living in New York and married to Lennon, Ono sent three blindfolded women into the audience during her Town Hall benefit concert for WBAI public radio with instructions to find a man with a tail pinned to his bottom. *Melody Maker*, the British music magazine, offered a decidedly pop culture assessment: “What's happening is a happening of sorts, and though there are several who happen to the exits, most of us like our ass pinched.”²⁵ While male audience members may have missed it, the joke was on them. Notably, the artist later insisted that there was no feminist agenda here, “just fun.”²⁶ However, Ono's now-feminist humor is clearly revealed on the liner notes to her *Feeling the Space* album, released a few months later. Ono lists her all-male band and production staff with rather peculiar statistics. For example: “Jack Douglas—chief engineer (581-6505) · November 6, 1945; 6'; 175 lbs; chest: 40"; waist: 32"; hips: 40"” And a note on the LP's cover reads: “This album is dedicated to the sisters who died in pain and sorrow and those who are now in prisons and in mental hospitals for being unable to survive in the male society.” (The previous year she and Lennon were given a



Fig. 14. Yoko Ono, *Touch Me* picture sleeve; B-side of John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band *Power to the People* (Apple Records, 1971). Courtesy of Yoko Ono.

“Positive Image of Women” award by the National Organization for Women for their records, *Woman is the Nigger of the World* and *Sisters O Sisters*.)

Once Ono and Lennon became partners, her musical performances, an essential part of her career all along, were preserved on pop singles and LP records. A surprising number of her songs dealt with touch as well. On 1970's *Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band*, for example, two tracks addressed the haptic: a track titled *Touch Me* (fig. 14) and another called *Why Not*, which concludes with a section in which she wails “touch me, John.” Numerous Ono tracks over the years are marked by the haptic, none perhaps more *sensually* than 1980's *Kiss, Kiss, Kiss*, with its refrain: “Touch, Touch, Touch, Touch me love.”

Today, of course, Ono is still recognized as a leading feminist artist. And it's now common for her work of all periods to be understood as such. Scholar Peggy Phelan, in her essay for *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, argues that “one of the most revolutionary legacies of feminist art concerns the epistemological contours of touch itself.”²⁷ “To think of touch epistemologically,” Phelan continues, “requires that we put the sentient body at the center of knowing [...]” Elsewhere in her essay, which touches upon Ono's 1964 *Cut Piece* at some length, but does not address any of Ono's *touch pieces*, per se, Phelan describes Ono's visual and performance

art as “among the most explicit meditations on touch, love, and peace we are likely to see for some time.”²⁸

Phelan is not the first scholar to connect the haptic with performance. Kathy O'Dell, in her 1997 essay “Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s” argues that “the reception of performance art—which is to say, the reception of the photographic documents from which performance art is inseparable—is not exclusively dependent on visual experience, but relies heavily on touch.”²⁹ These photographs, she explains, are the medium through which most people experience performance art. And in many cases, particularly in the 1970s, performances were staged specifically for documentation destined for magazines, journals, and artists' books, which were most often viewed and handled in the home, soliciting a response both visual and haptic.³⁰

While Ono's participatory *Touch Piece* performances facilitate a direct and unmediated touching (although one could certainly argue that this touch is displaced from the artist's own body to those of her audience/participants), with her 2008 exhibition, *Touch Me*, Ono returned to touch as a major theme, displacing the haptic, as O'Dell describes it, not through photographic reproduction, but through sculptural reproduction of a human body. One piece, *Touch Me III* (figs. 15-17), features a long table with several small compartments, each containing a section of a woman's body cast in silicone. On an adjacent pedestal, a bowl of water is offered with the instruction: “Wet your index and middle fingers to touch the body parts.” *Touch Me III* speaks at once of separation and connection. The basin of water, connoting ritual purification for many viewers, also relates to the artist's many *Water Pieces*. “We're all water in different containers; someday we'll all evaporate together,” she has stated.³¹ Water and air signify for Ono elements that connect us all. Touch, too, offers connection. From shaking hands to embracing, a caress and more.



Fig. 15. Yoko Ono, *Touch Me III* (detail), 2008.
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 16. Yoko Ono, *Touch Me III* (detail), 2008.
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono



Fig. 17. Yoko Ono at *Touch Me* opening, April 19, 2008.
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono

Reviewing the exhibition for *Artnet*, Michèle C. Cone describes the work as “an invitation to feel the cold of death. Whether these works are inspired by personal concerns of aging and dying or by the current state of the world, they make their point admirably,” she concludes.³²

Ono's interpretation differed, however. On the day of the exhibition's opening, the artist told talk show host Leonard Lopate: “It's to say we are all human. Let's touch each other.... Touching is more to do with love, caring, communication.”³³ By month's end, however, the piece told a very different story. A new didactic panel accompanied the work: “*Touch Piece III* was designed by the artist as a participatory work and the audience was invited to touch the sculpture. However, the body parts were deformed, and the toe was severed by rough handling. The artist has chosen to leave the damage visible as a sign of the violence women experience through life.”

She would address the fragility of the work when she recreated it in marble the following year for the *Venice Biennale* at which she was honored with the Golden Lion. She spoke to *The Japan Times* on that occasion.

Ono reflects that although many of her works are generated through instructions, they are not limited to a hierarchical relationship between artist and audience and, as in “touch me III,” can be inverted or freely interpreted. “I was always interested in that aspect of my work,” she wrote to *The Japan Times*. “I like the way the pieces keep growing because of the audience participation.”³⁴

Curiously, the gallery's press release makes no mention of *Touch Me III*, but touts *Touch Me II* (fig. 18) as the central work:

The centerpiece of the exhibition will be a large canvas covering the entire width of the gallery. Openings will be cut into the canvas, and viewers are invited to insert body parts through. Encompassed in this simple act are opposing elements of isolation, exposure, vulnerability, and defiance. The viewer will have the option to photograph themselves with supplied cameras; these photos will be displayed together on another canvas with the participant's own comments and thoughts written underneath the photos, furthering the inclusive nature of this work.³⁵

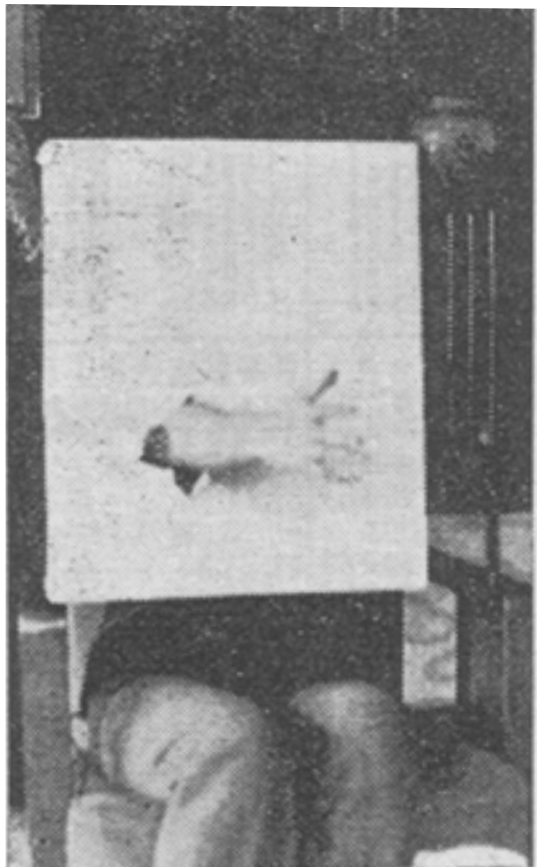


Fig. 18. Yoko Ono, Installation view, *Touch Me I* and *Touch Me II*, 2008. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono

According to Cone, “the resulting image is a morbid one, showing severed body parts strewn across a metaphorical battle field.”³⁶ The image Cone conjures as a “metaphorical battle field,” however, is open to multiple interpretations, and recognized as such by the press release.

At Ono's 1962 concert at Sogetsu Art Center, her *Painting to Shake Hands (Painting for Cowards)* (fig.19) was on view in the lobby exhibition. For *Painting to Shake Hands*, a performer is situated behind a canvas and inserts their arm through a hole in the canvas to greet guests.³⁷ The connection to *Touch Piece* seems clear enough. In announcing the impromptu performance of *Touch Piece* on the 1968 Frost on Saturday program, for example, Ono told the studio audience, “All you have to do is just touch each other, just shake hands, and so this is a way of touching each other.”³⁸ Scholar Martha Ann Bari has observed:

When Ono actualized these instructions by sitting behind a canvas with a hole in the middle, she became the embodiment of her painting,



Figs. 19 Yoko Ono, *Painting to Shake Hands (Painting for Cowards)*, 1961. From “Kemuri no chokoku/Moji no nai shishu” (*Fog Sculpture/Anthology of Poem without Letters*) *Shukan Yomiuri (Weekly Yomiuri)*, May 6, 1962, 69. Courtesy of Midori Yoshimoto.

with which the viewers were to physically interact. The spontaneous and improvisational interchange between artist and audience places Ono's painting between the media of painting and performance. By adding the “life media” of touch and sign language to the visual codes one commonly uses to “know” a painting, every viewing becomes a phenomenological experience that is shared by artist and audience.³⁹

A similar scene on the Sogetsu stage (although unrequited on the other side of the canvas) was documented in a review in the *Asahi Journal*. The anonymous critic described the performance of *AOS—To David Tudor* as:

An opera without any sound of instruments, in which all the participants read newspapers in different languages.... Arms and legs came out of the linen curtain and moved quietly as if they were groping for something. In front of such activities, on the other hand a French man and a Japanese man sat on chairs and systematically continued a strange French lesson.⁴⁰

While this performance was not a *Touch Piece* per se, it clearly resembles the scene Cone describes. Against the backdrop of multiple languages and attempts to understand them, it might also be construed to address frustrated communication, a literal failed “reaching out” not so different from Paik's earlier cited gibberish quote on the 1964 postcard event.

It shares the device of “limbs through the curtain” with yet another performance documented at Bluecoat Chambers in Liverpool in 1967. While the official program for Ono's Bluecoat Chambers performance on September 26, 1967 includes no *Touch Piece*, apparently one was performed. An undated document from the artist's archives appears to be a “prop list” of sorts for the event. It requests items both “For the Lecture” and “For the Performance.” The prop list specifies these pieces for the concert: *Peek Piece*, *Touch Piece*, *Cleaning Piece*, *Fly Piece*, *Wrapping Piece*, *Fog and Time Piece*, *Promise Piece* and *Add Colour Painting*. Since the Bluecoat engagement is among the few during this period for which both a lecture and performance were booked—and the pieces performed largely correspond with those on the prop list, it seems a reasonable assumption that it was used for this event. While the prop list and the official program differ slightly, a review corresponds more or less with both. While the official program lists *Peek Piece*, *Line Piece*, *Fly Piece*, *Wrapping*

Piece, *Fog Piece + Time Piece*, and *Wind Piece* (to be performed sometime during the evening—possibly with the fog machine for *Fog Piece*), a review of the concert by Spencer Leigh lists *Pig Piece* (a mis-hearing of *Peek*), *Torch Piece* (most likely a mis-understanding of *Touch Piece*), *Cleaning Piece* (including what the author calls *Add Red*—actually *Add Colour Painting*), *Fly Piece*, *Tuna Piece*, *Wrapping Piece* (including a description of what is in fact *Promise Piece*), and *Goodnight Piece* (which describes *Fog Piece*).⁴¹ The prop list requires the following items for *Touch Piece*:

- Large canvas to hang
- Long bamboo sticks and small flash lights [sic] and strings to bind the flashlights [or torches]
- One edge razors and scissors
- Large flashlight
- Baloons [sic] (strange shaped baloons)

Leigh's description of *Torch Piece* corresponds:

A large black cloth is brought to the front of the stage and held upright. It contains five holes. From out of four of them a battery-powered torch on a long pliable stick emerges. From the other, a pair of knickers on a similar stick. The

audience loves it. The sticks reach out further and then retreat, to be replaced by large balloons. A balloon bursts. The black cloth is taken away.⁴²

Other than *Touch Me II* at the 2008 Lelong show, which shares with it the holes that also appeared at Sogetsu, this *Touch Piece* (or *Torch Piece*) stands alone. The torches might of course be understood as lines of communication, their beams of light reaching out as they do, to audience members.⁴³

Throughout her career, Ono has sought with her work to extend our sensory apprehension of the universe—often using touch. The original *Touch Poems* of 1960 demand our touch with a vague promise of information not physically there. Suggesting lines of text, the lines of paper tape are blank and smooth, leading “readers” to ever more focused sensory sensitivity in the hopes of “getting it by touch.” She insists with her conceptual text pieces that we share the responsibility for the creation of images—optical, sensual, or otherwise— using her linguistic “seeds” to make our own mental objects. And with her participation performances, she urges us to connect with one another through touch—with varying results. Over the course of her career, these performances have resembled spiritual practices, as at Nanzenji;

	Bluecoat Chambers	
Prop List	Program	Leigh Review
<i>Peek Piece</i>	<i>Peek Piece</i>	<i>Pig Piece (Peek Piece)</i>
	<i>Line Piece</i>	
<i>Touch Piece</i>		<i>Torch Piece (Touch Piece)</i>
<i>Cleaning Piece</i>		<i>Cleaning Piece</i>
<i>Fly Piece</i>	<i>Fly Piece</i>	<i>Fly Piece</i>
<i>Wrapping Piece</i>	<i>Wrapping Piece</i>	<i>Wrapping Piece</i>
<i>Fog and Time Piece</i>	<i>Fog Piece + Time Piece</i>	<i>Goodnight Piece (Fog Piece)</i>
<i>Promise Piece</i>		<i>Promise Piece (with Wrapping Piece)</i>
<i>Add Colour Painting</i>		<i>Add Red Piece (Add Colour Painting</i>
	<i>Wind Piece</i>	(likely part of <i>Fog Piece</i> -to blow fog)
		<i>Tuna Piece</i>



Fig. 20. Yoko Ono, *Add Colour Painting: Touch Me*, 2008. Ed. 300. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. © Yoko Ono

encounter groups, as at the 1965 Avant-Garde festival; titillating entertainment, as at the Electric Circus; and feminist consciousness-raising—however humorous, as at the WBAI Town Hall concert. The spiritual enrichment, therapeutic benefits, cheap thrills, and feminist education were all achieved through the sense of touch.

In a 1966 document titled *To the Wesleyan People*, Ono discussed her ideas of sensory isolation in the context of then-popular Happenings:

People might say that we never experience things separately, they are always in fusion, and that is why “the happening,” which is a fusion of all sensory perceptions. Yes, I agree. But if that is so it is all the more reason and challenge to create a sensory experience isolated from other sensory experiences, which is something rare in daily life. Art is not merely a duplication of life. To assimilate art in life is different from art duplicating life.⁴⁴

Over the course of her now more than sixty-year career, Ono has returned to seemingly simple themes, realizing them in multiple media, with various receptions, over the course of many years.

And as with all of these pieces, with each iteration of her *Touch* pieces, Ono challenges her audiences to connect in a different way—to focus their act of perception in a manner that lends a unique intensity, not only to the process of perceiving itself, but to the things perceived as well.

In conjunction with her 2008 exhibition, Ono issued a multiple, *Add Colour Painting: Touch Me* (fig. 20), of 2008. A small, prefabricated canvas covered with Plexiglas that has the words “Touch Me” dye-cut out of it, the piece conflates the optical, the haptic, the conceptual, and the performative. As with the original 1960 *Touch Poems*, this piece challenges viewers to transgress ordinary gallery or museum rules and actually *touch* a painting, it relates to multiple other aspects of the artist’s oeuvre, most obviously, the text-based instruction paintings for which she is distinguished as a leading conceptual artist. It’s tempting to imagine that this multiple has brought Ono’s multiple iterations of *Touch Piece* full circle. But that’s not likely.

Notes

1 “Inside Yoko Ono’s MOMA Retrospective,” *Rolling Stone* YouTube Channel, last accessed on March 2, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=55&v=_YZq2iATnl0&feature=emb_logo.

2 Yoko Ono, electronic communication with the author, November 30, 2008.

3 Ono, conversation with the author, January 27, 2009, New York.

4 Program reproduced in *Instructions For Paintings by Yoko Ono May 24, 1962*, ed. Jon Hendricks (Budapest: Galeria 56, 1993), n.p.

5 Midori Yoshimoto, “1962-1964,” in *Yoko Ono One Woman Show 1960-1971*, eds. Klaus Biesenbach and Christoph Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 79. It also, apparently, contained a canvas version of *Painting to Shake Hands*.

6 Ono, January 27, 2009.

7 The instruction paintings are collected in Jon Hendricks, *Yoko Ono: Instructions For Paintings, May 24, 1962* (Budapest: Galeria 56, 1993.)

8 Most iterations of this text seem to deliberately butt the words up against each other.

9 See, for example, “Touch Piece,” in *9 Concert Pieces for John Cage*, December 15, 1966, reproduced in Alexandra Munroe with Jon Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono* (New York: Abrams, 2000), 281.

10 In the 1971 Simon and Schuster paperback edition of *Grapefruit*. Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), n.p. The original edition of 500 copies was published by the Wunternaum Press in Tokyo, 1964.

11 Yoshimoto, “1962-1964.” She cites Takahiko Imura, *Ono Yoko: Hitoto sakuhin* (Tokyo: Bunka shuppan-kyoku, 1985), 83.

12 Ono, January 27, 2009.

13 There remains some confusion regarding the date(s) of the performances at Naiqua Gallery. In the chronology Reiko Tomii and I produced for *Yes Yoko Ono*, we dated a single physical performance there to “June, 1964.” Subsequently, Midori Yamamura detailed performances there with specific dates: March 13 and April 2, 1964. (See next footnote.) Yamamura cites filmmaker Takahiko Imura as a witness—and presumably he dated the two performances, one of which included Paik’s remote participation. Interestingly, March 33rd aligns with April 2nd, more or less, assuming one continues counting within an extended month of March. In Yoshimoto’s later text, she cites Imura’s story about a performance in February. See: Yoshimoto, “Touch Piece,” in *Yoko Ono One Woman Show 1960-1971*, 92.

14 Reiko Tomii, “Yoko Ono: Tokyo/1964,” *X-TRA* 7, no.1 (Winter 2004): 43. Tomii is reporting information from Yamamura’s wall labels in the exhibition under review (*Grapefruit: Yoko Ono in 1964*, curated by Yamamura). Accessed on April 10, 2020, <https://www.x-traonline.org/article/yoko-ono-tokyo1964>.

15 Nam June Paik, “Ono Yoko vs. Yoko Ono,” in *The Book Review* 1, no. 1 (April 1970): 32. Translated by, and courtesy of, Mikihiko Hori.

16 Yoko Ono cited by Midori Yoshimoto, “Evening till Dawn,” in *Yes Yoko Ono*, 156.

17 Ono, quoted in Yoshimoto, “Evening...”

18 Ono, interview with the author, January 27, 2009, New York.

19 Yoko Ono, John Lennon, Jamie Mendelkau, and William Bloom, “Interview Piece: Yoko Ono & Grapefruit,” *International Times* 1, no. 110 (August 12-26, 1971): 15. Cited by Yoshimoto and reproduced in *Yoko Ono One Woman Show 1960-1971*, 225.

20 Ross Benson, “Covent Garden Goes Electric,” *London Look*, June 10, 1967, 12.

21 Yoko Ono, electronic communication with the author, December 1, 2008.

22 See Norma Coates, “John, Yoko, and Mike Douglas Performing Avant Garde Art and Radical Politics on American Television in the 1970s,” in *Music and the Broadcast Experience: Performance, Production, and Audiences*, eds. Christine Baade and James A. Deaville (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) Kindle e-book, Locations 4667-5059, companion website with video clip (example 9.2), accessed April 8, 2020, <https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199314706/resources/ch9/9.3/>

23 *Ibid.*, 222.

24 *Ibid.*, 223-224.

25 “Yoko: the lady’s a winner,” *Melody Maker*, June 2, 1973, 33.

26 Ono, interview with the author, January 27, 2009, New York.

27 Peggy Phelan, “The Returns of Touch: Feminist Performances, 1960-80,” in *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* eds. Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 347.

28 *Ibid.*, 350. Phelan’s essay moves on to discuss work by mostly women artists: Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono (*Cut Piece*, 1964), Marina Abramovic (*Rhythm O*, 1974), Gina Pane, Orlan, and Valie Export (*Touch Cinema*, 1968), among others. Significantly, Phelan discusses the relationship of Export’s *Touch Cinema* to Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, as detailed in her influential 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Notions of female objectification and the male gaze are

perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in Export's performance.

29 Kathy O'Dell, "Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s," *Performance Research* 2, no. 1(1997): 74.

30 *Ibid.*, 75.

31 See, for example, a Tweet from March 9, 2013: "You are water. I'm water. We're all water in different containers. That's why it's so easy to meet. Someday we'll evaporate together." Ono's *Water Pieces* date to the earliest days of her career.

32 Michèle C. Cone, "Death and the Artist," *Artnet*, May 20, 2008, accessed April 1, 2020, <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/cone/cone5-20-08.asp>

33 The Leonard Lopate Show, WNYC-FW (May 1, 2008), accessed April 10, 2020, <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/episodes/2008/05/01/segments/97916>.

34 Andrew Maerke, "Artist Yoko Ono is honored," *The Japan Times*, July 10, 2009, last accessed on April 1, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2009/07/10/arts/artist-yoko-ono-is-honored/#.XoOdGi2ZPyI>.

35 Galerie Lelong press release for Yoko Ono: touch me, April 18-June 7, 2008, accessed April 6, 2020, <http://galerielelong.com/exhibitions/yoko-ono6>.

36 Cone, "Death and the Artist."

37 These images appeared with reviews of the concert by an unidentified author in the *Weekly Yomiuri* and Toshi Ichianagi, respectively. See: "Kemuri no chokoku / Moji no nai shishu" [Fog Sculpture/Anthology of Poem without Letters], in *Shukan Yomiuri* [*Weekly Yomiuri*], May 6, 1962, 69; and Toshi Ichianagi, "Saizen' ei no koe: Donarudo Richi e no hanron" [Voice of the most avant-garde: Objection to Donald Richie] *Geijutsu shincho* [*New trends in art*] 13, no. 8 (August 1962): 138. My thanks to Midori Yoshimoto for providing the former.

38 Ono on *Frost on Saturday*, August 24, 1968.

39 Martha Ann Bari, *Mass Media is the Message: Yoko Ono and John Lennon's 1969 Year of Peace* (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2007), 35-36.

40 "Daitanna kokoromi: Ono Yoko no ivento" [Bold Experiment: Yoko Ono's event], *Asahi Journal* (June 1962): 45. Quote and translation kindly provided by Midori Yoshimoto, September 15, 1999. In her essay on the concert for *Yes Yoko Ono* (p. 151), Yoshimoto specifies that they were *women's limbs*, based on other sources.

41 See Spencer Leigh, "Strange Days Indeed," *beatles unlimited magazine* (January/February 1998): 50-51. With the exception of *Tuna Piece* (which seems to describe *Bag Piece*), Leigh's reviewed program corresponds largely with the prop list. *Line Piece*, listed on the

program is neither evidenced by Leigh's recounting nor the prop list. In email correspondence with Leigh on March 30, 2020, he indicated that he made his notes after the event, although the "review" was published 31 years later. Regarding the official program, he wrote, "I've never seen this before and I am pretty certain we didn't have programmes. Yoko (or Tony Cox) announced each item. I had heard *Peek Piece* as *Pig Piece* and probably thought it had something to do with the police [...]." As for *Torch Piece/Touch Piece*, he offered: "Touch could be their typing. It was torches on the end of long pliable sticks." Film documentation of the concert exists. A short section, assembled as *Yoko Ono: Music of the Mind*, includes excerpts of *Cleaning Piece*, *Add Red Painting*, *Fly Piece*, *Promise Piece*, *Bag Piece*, *Wrapping Piece* and *Fog Piece*. Accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxNjBrtqTPs>. Additional footage in the artist's archive includes footage of *Time Piece*, but no footage of *Touch Piece*. Thanks to Connor Monahan of Studio Ono (Ono's office) for this information. It's possible that *Touch Piece* was difficult to film with lights pointing at the audience (television cameras) in the darkness.

42 Leigh, "Strange Days Indeed," 50.

43 There remains some confusion regarding the title. While I am unaware of a work called *Torch Piece*, I am likewise unaware of any other performances of *Touch Piece* that take this form. However, in the document from the artist's archives that I refer to as the "prop list," except for the knickers, the items required for *Touch Piece* align precisely with those described in the document. It is possible as well that this may have been a typographical error in the "prop list," as Leigh suggests. The knickers might simply be a nod to Swinging London or an unauthorized addition by one of the performers wielding the poles and torches. Ono had just recently gained notoriety for her *Film No. Four (Bottoms)*, which featured a series of bare backsides, so it could also reference that. The film's regular screenings, after months of legal wrangling, had begun in London the previous month. The balloons remain a mystery, at least within the context of *Touch Piece*, however. Ono's *Half-a-Wind Show* (known also as *Half-a-Sky Show*, among other titles) would open on October 11, less than two weeks later, and included the piece *Air Talk*, in the catalogue:

Air Talk, 1967

It's sad that the air is the only thing we share.

No matter how close we get to each other,
there is always air between us.

It's also nice that we share the air.
No matter how far apart we are,
the air links us.

Thus the balloons, in this context can be understood as connecting us.

44 “To the Wesleyan People, January 23, 1966,” self-published insert in *The Stone* (New York: Judson Gallery, 1966), n.p.

Until his retirement in January 2021, **Kevin Concannon** served as Professor of Art History and Director of the School of Visual Arts at Virginia Tech. His scholarship focuses on art of the 1960s, particularly the work of Yoko Ono. His exhibitions and catalogues include *Marilyn Minter: Splash (2020)*; *Willie Cole UpCycle (2018)*; *Laurie Anderson: Invented Instruments (2018)*; *Lynn Hershman Leeson: Body Collage (2016)*; *Two Trees: Rona Pondick and Jennifer Steinkamp (2013)*; *Agency: Art and Advertising* (with John Noga, 2008); *YOKO ONO IMAGINE PEACE Featuring John & Yoko's Year of Peace* (with John Noga, 2007); and *Mass Production: Artists' Multiples and the Marketplace*, 2006. His essay “Nothing Is Real: Yoko Ono's Advertising Art” appears in *YES: YOKO ONO* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and the Japan Society of New York, 2000); along with “Chronology” and “Bibliography” (both with Reiko Tomii) in the same volume. In 2008, his essay “Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964): From text to performance and back again,” was featured in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*.