

CURRENT

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Art

Double jeopardy

Another unpopular war, another message from the pop-culture phenomenon we love to misunderstand



courtesy

A retrospective of Yoko Ono's conceptual and performance-based work opens at the UTSA 1604 campus and on billboards around town this week.

By [Elaine Wolff](#)

On hold for Yoko Ono, and the phone system is playing "Watching the Wheels," from *Double Fantasy*, the "comeback" album released by Ono and John Lennon shortly before he was murdered in New York on December 8, 1980. I'm back in my childhood basement in Minnesota, lounging on ribbon-candy shag carpet while the turntable plays. Ronald Reagan's *Morning in America* hasn't chased the smell of patchouli and cultural revolution from the folds of my sister's tie-dyed prom dress yet, and the dropouts I imagine changing the world look like ashram devotees, not a young Bill Gates. Even now, when I hear the song I experience a yearning sense of possibility, which makes me realize that I may be a Beatles fan, but I'm the anti-war child of the post-Beatles Lennon.

Still waiting. Someone picks up the line and puts it back on hold.

"Wheels" is followed by "Nobody Told Me," the hit single from *Milk and Honey*, which Ono completed after Lennon's death and released in 1984.

1984. We haven't realized George Orwell's darkest predictions yet. No one — well, almost no one — imagines the vast 'borg of technological Joneses that we will become in two short decades. Name the year since Reagan took office at the beginning of that same decade to which the refrain "strange days indeed" doesn't apply. It's hard not to wonder wistfully what Lennon, that artistic chameleon, would have made of the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9-11, WMDs, the iPhone (John Lennon on the internet!).

And harder still to remember that while Lennon morphed attitudes and methods almost by the hour, his greatest influence — artistic and personal, responsible if nothing else for Lennon's sporadic rejection of commercialism and public expectation — has remained unfashionably constant while history has circled around to meet her. To say I'm a child of the post-Beatles Lennon is to say that I'm a child of Yoko Ono as much as John.

Yoko Ono, Japanese child of privilege, World War II refugee, media whipping girl, was an up-and-coming artist in 1966 when John Lennon walked into London's Indica Gallery — a story that is now apocryphal in the Beatles legend, but deserves equal weight in Ono's story, because it is in effect the day the artist and the pop-culture phenomenon traded places. Before the '60s were over, Lennon and Ono would capitalize on his fame to draw attention to the war in Vietnam, and on a related note, to the Nixon Administration's aversion to political criticism. 1969's infamous honeymoon *Bed-Ins* led to 1971's utopian "Imagine," and over the next few years, Lennon would challenge his adoring fan base with songs titled "Woman is the Nigger of the World" and "I Don't Wanna be a Soldier Mama."

But we just couldn't get over the Beatles and the homewrecker role we had assigned Ono to see the depth of her influence, to notice that two talented iconoclasts were creating art together and in response to one another. A generation later, the media would embrace her as a fashion icon, sometimes a musician, but never the conceptual artist that led a reliable *Billboard*-hit generator off the beaten musical path — even as her forerunners and compatriots became art-world crossover successes: Claes Oldenburg, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik.

But Ono moved in the same (sometimes belatedly) exalted circles as those nearly household names, participating in influential live performances as part of Fluxus — an early 1960s movement that drew its energy from an anti-art-establishment attitude and a critique of storefront capitalism — adopting and developing themes that are recognizable today in Ono's work, an interactive work that encourages participants to blink "I love you," part John Cage, part Morse Code, using a small flashlight, as well as in her current "Imagine Peace" billboards.

San Antonio artist and teacher Ken Little will adapt Ono's noted 1964 Fluxus performance "Cut Piece" on October 26 as part of Yoko Ono: Imagine Peace, which opens in San Antonio September 26. The show, which debuted at Ohio's University of Akron, tries to restore balance to the Ono-Lennon artistic relationship. "Imagine," after all, was inspired by Ono's "instruction pieces," in turn the legacy of a decade that was throwing off the dogma and academic hegemony of post-WWII Abstract Expressionism as violently as possible, preferably with a large, interactive audience at hand. The Bed-Ins were perfect Fluxus performance works, accessible, anti-establishment, socially progressive — and visionary in their attempt to use mass media to spread a message of their choosing.

In 1965, like Oldenberg and Fluxus founder George Maciunas before her, Ono parodied the art marketplace with her "Conceptual Sales List." Ono and Lennon's collaborative work built on the notion of ideas as commodities with the power to counteract physical reality. "It's got to be sold to the man in the street," Lennon told Newsweek following the Montreal Bed-In that produced the wildly popular recording of "Give Peace a Chance." "We want to make peace a big business for everybody."

Lennon was in turn big business for Ono and almost everything he touched, and Imagine Peace doesn't shy away from his symbiotic influence on Ono. In part because of his early interest, and premature death, one of Ono's "Conceptual Sales List" items becomes reality next month on an island in Iceland: the "Imagine Peace Tower," 20 meters high and engraved with the lyrics of the eponymous song, will be unveiled on October 9, Lennon's 67th birth anniversary.

Just ahead of the San Antonio show's opening, Ono spoke with the Current by phone.

Even from the beginning you thought about and addressed the idea of commodification, the way that ideas become a product for consumption. And it seems like that's even more true now. Do you think with your work that that aids it, or ...?

Well, still things like this happen. The billboard and all that — it's not a commodity at all, it's just a message, you know? Well, in the world where everything's become commodity, it's kind of difficult to keep on doing it, but I think it's not really that difficult. I think we should just step up and do it.

And, too, with celebrityhood, sometimes people look at Fluxus and they say that's the time when art became more about the individual's ideas and their opinions, as opposed to just the work itself.

Well, I don't know, because I'm just right in the midst of it, in a way, in that I'm an artist who's been doing things hopefully that meant something to people, etcetera. That's for the critics, I think, what happened historically, etcetera. I think Fluxus is a good thing that happened, and it's still going on. When George [Maciunas] decided to call it Fluxus, I don't think he thought that it would go on like this. But also I'm sure that he would have loved it.

I've noticed that here in San Antonio there's been a renewed interest in Dadaism, and movements that are also related to those concepts, again in a time of war and conflict. Do you think there's a reason that those types of art movements or ideas are more appealing when the world seems to be ...

But I think there's a big difference between Dadaism and what, for instance, I'm doing. Dada was actually expressing a kind of sadness, or whatever it is, reflecting what was going on at the time and not liking it. So it was kind of rebellious art, shall we say. But I'm not rebelling against anything, I'm just trying to make a more positive world by doing things together.

During [your and John Lennon's] Year of Peace, which this exhibit is partly about, one of the things you said is that we need to remember that it's not about "them," there's not a "them" that's doing something bad, it's about us as a whole ... how does the message "imagine peace" encourage us to think that way?

Well, the fact that we're always curious about "them," and it's not very logical to be like that, we should do what

we think is right and don't put our attention too much on others.

How important is it to you [for viewers] to see parallels between the Iraq War and the Vietnam War when they go to the exhibit?

Well, I think that really it's getting to a point that we can be very, very positive about the situation, because I really think that everybody's starting to see what's happening. And so we can all stand together and try to change. In old days, we used to have so much respect for lawyers, doctors, politicians, you know? And now we're starting to think, wait a minute, what was this respect about, so we're starting to wise up and starting to mature, so to speak, and we're starting to take responsibility ourselves.

Is it important for you as an artist to feel that you see an impact from your work, or feel a response from the audience?

Well, you never know what people are thinking, really, so if you focus on that too much, you go crazy. There was a very interesting thing: John and I were walking down the street, John Lennon and me, and a fan came and said, "John I loved your record, the newest record's fantastic."

So [John] said, "Oh, which song? And the guy sort of like looked, "Um, uh ... "

"Oh, are you talking about this record? Which title was it?"

"Uh, um ... "

The fact that the guy wanted so much to please John that he probably didn't listen to the record or buy it or anything, but just thought that if you meet somebody like John you're supposed to say, "I love your record." So there are many people who might say something to me, or who might say that they dislike my thing or whatever, but you never know what that really means.

When the war in Iraq first began, there was some criticism saying that the art world was not being active or political enough, but it seems since then [it's] become very involved in expressing values or feelings.

The thing is, yes, some people are very courageous in coming out, sort of saying something about what's going on now, commenting on it, but even if you don't do that, and most people say, well, most of them are doing that — don't be negative about it, because just the fact that you are being an artist and doing an artwork in a world situation like this is very courageous. As you said about the society that's more and more increasing the idea of commodity, and all that: So why are you going to be an artist? It's not the best way to make big money.

The celebrityhood that's conferred on [some] artists now, I feel is a way of saying, you won't get rich being an artist, but maybe we'll make you famous for a little while instead.

I think that — I say this so many times, but I still should say this — this whole world, there are two industries, peace industry and war industry. And the war industry people are so together, they're so united in what they want to do, so they don't even have to talk to each other, they just action, that's it. Whereas the peace-industry people are so meticulous, and idealists, and so fastidious that they just keep on arguing and discussing endlessly, that, oh no, this is not the right way; oh, your way is not right; oh my way — so we can never get together.

Are we always doomed to be a step behind then?

Exactly. We can never win over the war-industry people. The fact that you're just being a florist or something — that is fine, you're in the peace industry, you're doing something peaceful rather than making weapons and killing people. So basically we have to embrace everybody in the peace industry instead of being snobs and saying, oh, that's not right, or why are you just a florist. It's beautiful that all of us are in the peace industry. So, the next step is for us to have some understanding about each other, forgiving each other, and get together. And if we don't do that, if the peace industry is not as strong as the war industry, well, of course we're always going to have war. •

VISUAL ART

Yoko Ono:

Imagine Peace

Featuring John and Yoko's Year of Peace

10am-4pm Fri,

1-4pm Sat

Through Oct 28

Opening reception: 5-9pm Wed, Sep 26

UTSA Art Gallery

UTSA 1604 Campus

FILM

The U.S. vs. John Lennon

6pm Mon, Oct 1

Retama Auditorium

UTSA 1604 Campus