

Instruction Paintings: Yoko Ono and 1960s Conceptual Art”

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Abstract

Yoko Ono was one of the most prolific conceptual artists in the late 1950s to 1970s. During that time she produced hundreds of instruction paintings—compact statements which carried the potentiality of a more material manifestation but which also existed as art in their conceptual, language-based state. In both its origins and goals, Ono’s work was radically different from the work of other artists of this period; yet, scholarship on conceptual art in the 1960s underestimates or misrepresents her contribution. This paper critically investigates Ono’s work as a conceptual artist, focusing on her instruction painting pieces in particular: their emergence as a kind of art work, their similarities and differences from other conceptual works of the late 1950s through the 1960s (specifically, with event scores and word pieces, associated with George Brecht and La Monte Young respectively), and finally, their role as a reinvention of the Duchampian ready-made.

Keywords

Yoko Ono, instruction paintings, ready-made, conceptual art, Fluxus

As a conceptual artist, Yoko Ono is often overlooked and under-discussed within serious art scholarship. Though one of the forerunners of conceptual art, scholarship on conceptual work of the 1960s underestimates her contribution or fails to mention her at all. Arthur Danto writes that “Yoko Ono is really one of the most original artists of the last half-century,” yet “her fame made her almost impossible to see.”¹ Perhaps it was the Beatlemania, or perhaps the difficulty of “seeing” Ono was due to the dominance of

other artists during this time—namely, John Cage, George Brecht, and La Monte Young, who championed what seemed—at first glance—to be the same kind of artistic project. This paper endeavors to critically investigate Ono’s work as a conceptual artist who has been neglected in art scholarship, focusing on her instruction painting pieces in particular: their emergence as a kind of art work, their similarities and differences from the other conceptual works of the late 1950s through the 1960s (specifically, with event scores and word pieces, associated with Brecht and Young respectively), and finally, their status and role as immaterial art objects as constituting a return to Duchamp, especially considered within the ‘readymade aesthetic’ at large during the second half of the twentieth century. Her work’s engagement with the absurd and physically impossible sets her apart from other conceptual artists of the time who worked on event scores or word pieces as a kind of “poetry of the everyday,” and deserves to be investigated independently of her peers’ artistic endeavors.

In the public consciousness, Ono’s artistic prowess is overshadowed by the celebrity of her marriage to her third husband and Beatles front-man John Lennon. As a person she is often portrayed as parasitic to her husband’s fame, and many descriptions of her are in relation to Lennon (and by the extension, the Beatles). Even academic attention to Ono is uncharacteristically tabloid-like, with a fixation on her biography rather than her works. Take, as a recognizable symptom, the tendency of books or articles on Ono to be titled, themed, or structured based on her relation or non-relation to Lennon. One book, ostensibly an Ono biography, is organized into four chapters, “Before John,” “John and Yoko,” “After John,” and as an afterthought, “Art and Music.”² Furthermore, the book itself is titled *Woman*, which gives one the impression that the author is identifying Ono’s entire existence as one half of a binary, that is, Ono is to Woman as Lennon is to Man. It has even been said that her marriage to Lennon revived public interest in “early American conceptual art,” without which her work might have been forgotten.³

This is not to say that John Lennon should be ignored when speaking about Ono; certainly the points when her life intersected with Lennon’s were some of the noisiest in terms of public consciousness and media attention. Ono was quite productive artistically during that time as well, having collaborated with Lennon on various songs and poems, including the song “Give Peace a Chance,” a solo by Lennon released as a single by the Plastic Ono Band in 1969, with Ono’s “Remember Love” on the B-side.⁴ Nonetheless, inadequate [critical and public] attention is given to

the investigation of Ono's own musical and visual works themselves. Of course, there are notable exceptions, for example the thorough chapter on Ono and her work in Midori Yoshimoto's *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*,⁵ although such exemplary works are too far and few in between. It is a symptom of the problem that Yoshimoto's excellent chapter on Ono appears in a book focusing on a very specific subset of artists, that is, women of Japanese descent in the latter half of the twentieth century, indicating Ono's importance as an artist is only within the context of a marginalized group.

Perhaps it is because of her associative celebrity that Ono's own career is ignored. However, there is also a fundamental oversimplification of her artistic endeavor in serious scholarship, as historians traditionally place Ono within the Fluxus camp. Fluxus, the international network of "anti-art," intermedia artists spearheaded by George Maciunas, began with Maciunas' organization of *Fluxfests* across Europe in September 1962.⁶ However, by this time Ono's conceptual work had already come into maturity, as exemplified by the instructional piece, *Painting to See the Room* of 1961.⁷ It is then more accurate to think of Ono as a proto-Fluxus artist, whose contribution to Fluxus was important in the group's formation of their conceptual tenants: broadly speaking, she brought in a Buddhist and Asiatic influence, and furthermore she introduced several Japanese artists to Maciunas.⁸ Yet Ono is painted as being informed by Fluxus, rather than being a major early influence, and her work continues to be overshadowed by the work of her peers of the mid '60s.

Liz Kotz, in her book, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*, mentions Ono only cursorily. The entry in the book's index for "Ono, Yoko" shows less than a dozen pages in which Ono appears, and in those instances, she and her work are usually used to highlight similarities or differences with the artists at the heart of the discussion, e.g. Ono's differences from La Monte Young. With a career spanning over half of century,⁹ Ono was prolific in both the visual and musical arts, and consistently explored the role of language in pushing conceptual boundaries. Through the late 1950s to the early '70s alone, Ono produced hundreds of conceptual works.¹⁰ Given Ono's artistic output, it is surprising to see Kotz's sparse treatment of Ono, especially when the artist's instruction paintings diverged significantly and in interesting ways from the event scores of Brecht and the word pieces of Young, and certainly enough to merit treatment in a book on language and art in the 1960s. Kotz is not the only one who ignores Ono's contribution to conceptual art; while there are numerous exhibition

catalogs published for Ono's shows, appearing in especial abundance after the 1990s,¹¹ critical work focusing on Ono is a rare find. Broader discussion on conceptual art, on New York artists, or on Fluxus, such as Kotz's *Words to Be Looked At* and Thomas Kellein's *Fluxus*, position Ono as merely a companion to more "significant" artists. Yet, their oversimplification of Ono's project with her instruction paintings—reducing it to being in kind with Brecht or Young's vision of creating "everyday poetry"—is misleading and impoverishing, cheating art history of a more precise reading of her work. Ono's instruction pieces are more akin to ready-made visual objects (in the mind and imagination), a conceptual Duchamp, rather than ready-made actions or events, as were the projects of Brecht and Young.

A Conceptual Statement: event score, word piece, and instruction painting

In the late 1950s, select figures began to investigate and develop a form of art work that was highly conceptual and shared the general characteristic of being "statements comprised of short, simple, vernacular words."¹² These statements, loosely called "event" scores, "could take object form or produce... material objects potentially presented for exhibition, just as the scores themselves could be (and were) exhibited." At the same time, no physical materiality was required for the event scores to be a work—like the musical score, the textual statements themselves were also recognized as the work. Yet, these event scores were often not seen as art in themselves, they were "seen as tools for something else, scripts for a performance or project or musical piece which is the 'real' art."¹³ This ambiguity of what constituted the work was due to the expansion of the medium of the conceptual text, which existed as linguistic idea, material object, and executable action all at once. They had "an implicitly tripartite structure that allows them to be 'realized' as language, object, and performance"¹⁴ simultaneously. As conceptual works, event scores were not entirely novel inasmuch as they were not the first sort of art of which the material was a number of "concepts" involving language, as Henry Flynt recognized.¹⁵

Prominent in the development of the event score were George Brecht, La Monte Young, and Yoko Ono. These three artists were coming from different directions and moving towards different goals, yet each emerged in the late 1950s to early 1960s with roughly the same form of work: short, enigmatic conceptual statements. Brecht, whose "art of insignificant and silly gestures" purportedly set the stage for the legacy of Fluxus,¹⁶ coined the term

“event scores.”¹⁷ He seemed to come upon this form from his participation in John Cage’s class on experimental composition at the New School. It could be said that Cage’s influence on Brecht would categorize the latter as coming out of the Cagean tradition of chance-generated experimental music. Yet he recognized the limitations of music as Cage saw them at the time, as Brecht “wanted to make music that wouldn’t only be for the ears. Music isn’t just what you hear...but everything that happens.”¹⁸ Brecht began to treat the “task-like exercises employing mundane objects”¹⁹ which Cage assigned as a sort of compositional homework as not merely the means to a work, but as the work itself.

DANCE CONSTRUCTION.
A group of seven or eight people stand together in a very close huddle. One member of the group climbs up the mass of people and then down again becoming once more a part of the mass. Immediately another is climbing. The movement must be constant but not hurried. Sometimes it happens that there are two climbing at once. That’s all right. The dance construction should be continued “long enough”, perhaps ten minutes.

Figure 1. One of the 5 works by Simone Morris published in *An Anthology*. (See Appendix for larger image.)

La Monte Young in particular wanted to distance his work from Cage, saying in 1966 that he “was taking [Cage’s] ideas a step further...to delimit the work to be a single event.” Preferring the term “word pieces,” the improvisatory turn to his work seems to have been influenced by Ann Halprin’s *Dancer’s Workshop*, in which he was involved from 1959 to 1960.²⁰ Simone Forti, who attended Halprin’s workshop concurrently with Young, later published “dance constructions” and “dance reports” in *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (see Fig. 1), which were “accounts of everyday movement,”²¹ not dissimilar to Young’s early works. The similarities between Forti and Young would point to the influence of their common activity.

Although the bulk of Ono’s published conceptual statements were created during the 1960s, some of her earliest works were from 1952-1953, such as *Secret Piece*.²² This predates similar works by Brecht and Young by almost a decade, which perhaps explains why Ono’s goals diverged more sharply from theirs. Ono, more so than both Brecht and Young, was the most isolated from the Cagean tradition, and she was also the one to venture the furthest away. In fact, though a professor at Sarah Lawrence College pointed her to the direction of Cage and other avant-garde composers in New York, she was “not interested in learning about other people at that point,” and wanted to pursue her own direction.²³ Her “more varied and provocative scores” which “diverge from [their] proto-minimal ‘event’ project”²⁴ suggest disparate goals. Ono was less interested in a singularity of the event, which Brecht found through the form of one-word event scores, such as *Exit*, and which Young thought was the line.²⁵ Ono began to think about the so-called Cagean aesthetic even before meeting Cage, indeed, before Cage himself was experimenting with his project. In the 1930s, while living in Japan as a child, she was enrolled in the school Jiyu-Gakuen, which provided musical

education to pre-school children. At Jiyu-Gakuen, which translates to “Learning Garden of Freedom,” she recalled “receiving homework in which you were supposed to listen to the sound of the day.”²⁶ Ono described this exercise as formative for her future artistic outlook, as it made her into a person who habitually listened to and processed the sound in her own environment as music.

Like Brecht and Young, Ono had a preferred term for her conceptual statements. She called them “paintings”—“instruction paintings,” or “unfinished paintings.” Kellein notes that “at first glance, [her work] is about radically dissolving the boundaries of music, then those of painting and poetry, continuing on to strip our concepts of experience and object. The canonical separation of the arts is put into question...”²⁷ Indeed, the separation of the kinds of arts from one another, and the closed definitions for mediums and types of works, was something Ono wanted to move away from. She writes:

My paintings, which are all instruction paintings (and meant for others to do), came after collage and assemblage (1915) and happening (1905) came into the art world. Considering the nature of my painting, any of the above three words or a new word can be used instead of the word, painting. But I like the old word painting because it immediately connects with “wall painting” painting.²⁸

In selecting a historically loaded term, especially one closely tied to its medium, paint, Ono’s choice implies that she felt a stronger connection to the visual art tradition than to the musical one. Considering the shadow of Greenbergian medium specificity, which fixated on a closed definition of painting, Ono’s preferred term was a purposeful challenge to what may have been viewed as the medium most distant from her project. Brecht’s “event score” derived from the musical score, and Young’s “word piece” came from a linguistic or poetic tradition. The traditional forms of the score and the poem are formally and functionally more similar to the conceptual statement than painting. If Ono could “open” the definition of painting, if she could encourage a broader concept of the medium of painting, it would be a greater stretch than moving from the conceptual statement to the score or poem.

Even though Ono’s “instruction paintings” diverged from the explicitly musical Cagean tradition, her loose sense of the different arts²⁹ suggests that she would consent to an interpretation of her conceptual statements as scores. Ono’s idea of form is open; much

like Brecht, she does not think it is the case “that one must use only sounds as a means to create music.”³⁰ Ono attributes her aesthetic attitude—her endorsement of opening the idea of medium—to being heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism. As Geoff Smith notes, non-exclusive definition was a very “Zen idea that has engendered an open, all-embracing attitude towards music [after John Cage],”³¹ a relaxation of the medium to which Ono contributed significantly.

Instruction Paintings and *Grapefruit*

It was important for Ono that people not think of the instruction paintings as “calligraphic art”—that is, art which used words as an aesthetic element or object.³² Ono wanted the work to be thought of as instructions, retaining the tripartite structure of being simultaneously a concept, an object, and a work to be realized. At her first show with instruction paintings, in 1961 at the AG Gallery in New York City, people ignored the conceptual element of her pieces and regarded it as “just a calligraphy show”³³ since she had displayed her instructions in her own writing. Ono recalled that only one obscure newspaper even mentioned it as an instruction painting show.³⁴ After that, Ono elected to “print out the instructions instead of using my own handwriting, to make a point that they were instructions, not words drawn by the artist as visual images.”³⁵

While briefly living in Japan again, in the summer of 1964, Ono self-published *Grapefruit* (see Fig. 2), a collection of 150 of her instruction paintings.³⁶ In a way the book was self-titled, since Ono thought of herself as a grapefruit, a cross between a lemon and an orange, a metaphorical statement on her international identity. The book was divided into five sections: music, painting, event, poetry, and object. However, true to her belief in an open medium, the categories did not define the works and their “form.” Each work could be interpreted as belonging to any of the categories in which they were not found, further pointing to the ambiguities of each medium’s separation and Ono’s project of interweaving the different arts. Although this book was published in Japan on a limited run of 500, Maciunas helped disseminate the work in the United States and Europe through his Fluxus connections.³⁷ *Grapefruit* remains Ono’s most well-known book of instructions, having been reprinted in the United States in 1970 with new content (including the much noted introduction by John Lennon) and again in 2000 by Simon & Schuster.



Figure 2. The first print of Yoko Ono’s book of instructional paintings, *Grapefruit*, from 1964.

One of Ono’s artist’s books, *The Other Rooms*, which was published as part of Ono’s exhibition, “ANTON’S MEMORY,” at the

Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation in Venice from May to September 2009 is similar to *Grapefruit* in size, arrangement, and theme. Some of the similarities are uncanny, for example, between *Painting to See the Room* from *Grapefruit* and *Space Transformer I* from *The Other Rooms*:

SPACE TRANSFORMER I

Drill a small, almost invisible, hole
in the center of the canvas
and see the room through it.³⁸

The former is identical to *Painting to See the Room*, albeit with different lineation:

PAINTING TO SEE THE ROOM

Drill a small, almost invisible, hole
in the center of the canvas and see
the room through it.

1961 autumn³⁹

Without a date of authorship for *Space Transformer I*, it is difficult to assess primacy of arrangement between it and *Painting to See the Room* (are they the same work, and if not, which came first?). There is also the possibility that Ono thought of the various *Space Transformers* as a variation or re-interpretation of the *Painting to See the Room* series originally published in *Grapefruit*. Regardless, the kinship of the two instruction paintings across almost 50 years attests to the thematic constancy of Ono's project.

Readymade Action or Readymade Object? Authorship and Materiality

George Maciunas stated in 1978 that "Duchamp thought mainly about readymade objects. John Cage extended it to readymade sounds. George Brecht extended it furthermore...into readymade actions, everyday actions."⁴⁰ Is Ono, like Brecht, setting the readymade action into motion? Just from the term "instruction paintings," one gathers the implication that more so than "event score" or "word piece," they existed as art works waiting to be painted by instruction—that is, as objects not yet realized. Whereas the musical score is traditionally thought of as the work, and each performance as an interpretation and thus extension of the work, the instructions for a painting are usually not regarded as part of the



Figure 3. A page from Jasper Johns' notebook from c. 1963-64. (See Appendix for larger image).

“work-ness” of the painting. Kotz notes that Duchamp wrote “brief, cryptic notes” to himself with the same kind of “spare, attenuated use of language,” as the conceptual statements.⁴¹ Jasper Johns too made notes for his own work, many of which are remarkably similar to Ono’s instruction paintings (see Fig. 3). The following is a particularly notable one:

Take an object
Do something to it
Do something else to it
“ “ “ “ “42

In a way, Ono’s work is less like the score and more like the sketchbook notes which serve to loosely guide the work, with more similarities to instructions for a work with a planned potential—an object yet to be realized. In this respect, Ono’s instruction paintings are a kind of return to the Duchampian readymade object, rather than a readymade action in the sense of Brecht’s work, which was characterized as readymade due to its everyday-ness. Brecht’s event scores, such as *Exit* (see Fig. 4), did not need to be performed since they existed as actions already enacted by regular living. In Ono’s work the absurdity of some of her pieces brings them out of the realm of the everyday lived action. As will be discussed later, Ono opts to use her instruction paintings to investigate the Duchampian question of art objecthood, materiality, and authorship.

Kotz argues that for Young’s and Brecht’s conceptual statements “a condition of ‘maximal availability’ is most effectively created...a kind of structure that other artists could use to produce diverse interpretations or realizations—thereby creating new pieces, and effectively blurring the boundary between ‘composer’ and ‘interpreter.’”⁴³ Ono extends the availability of the work beyond both Brecht and Young; her project tends to introduce a participatory aspect that adds more permutations due to chance or re-authoring beyond the control of the planned artist or performer. Whereas Brecht and Young opened the door to extreme instances of re-authoring, neither is as explicit as Ono in requiring it. That is, Ono blurs the line between artist and spectator more than Brecht or Young, insofar as the work cannot be realized without one or the other, or even, the one as the other. The spectator becomes not only a participant, but is the work itself. Yoshimoto argues that Ono, “rather than directing her work to the art crowd...attempts to reach a wider audience, ultimately seeking...communication with the viewer.”⁴⁴ As event scores tended to be “physically modest and de-skilled,”⁴⁵ they were perhaps the best mode for Ono to interact and

engage the spectator since their simplicity made it easy for people to enact the work and thus bring the work into realization.

Initially, Ono called her works “unfinished paintings”⁴⁶ because she wanted to “recast art from a finished object to an unfinished process, to be completed by others.”⁴⁷ “Often written in the imperative,” Alice Munroe argues “they are calls to action”⁴⁸ that ask for the participation of others. Unlike a traditional musical score, which comes with the understanding that the performer is to realize the score faithfully and only interpret within the score’s scope of allowance (e.g. within a specific section in which improvisation is acceptable or, more commonly, to play slightly with the magnitude and duration of the written notes), one of the most essential characteristics of the instruction paintings is that they are unfinished and open to mutability. As an unfinished work others were not only allowed but expected to add to it. Of course, the paintings still exerted some measure of guidance, with varying degrees of strictness. Some are very specific, such as *Tape Piece V*:

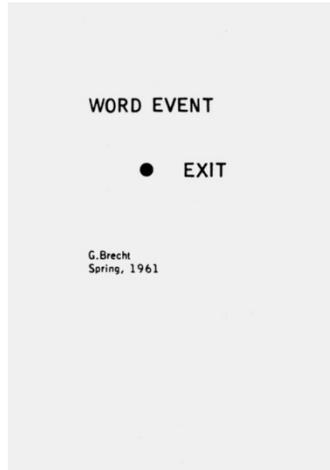


Figure 4. George Brecht’s event score, *Exit*, from 1961.

TAPE PIECE V

Comb Piece (a)
Take a tape of your wife combing every day.
Keep it.
Bury it with her when she dies.

Comb Piece (b)
Take a tape of your husband combing every day.
Keep it.
Play it after he dies.

Comb Piece (c)
Take a tape of your child combing.
Let her listen to it when she is sick in bed.

1963 autumn⁴⁹

Whereas other paintings permit much more freedom for interpretation and artistic exploration:

SUN PIECE

Watch the sun until it becomes square.

1962 winter⁵⁰

When she was beginning to work with instructionalizing her work, Ono found that in the environment of the time, “artist and musicians were slow in allowing others to touch their work... [E]ven the public felt that was not what an artist should do: to let others participate in their work... [T]he work had to be made solely by the artist and remain the way it was produced.”⁵¹ Yet, a static work “seemed innately false”⁵² to Ono. Ono noted that growing up through World War II in Japan as “a war child, life was transient, and often with sudden changes.”⁵³ This experience let her realize the advantages of embracing the uncontrollable factors of change and chance; thus her attitude as an artist developed into a desire to “let the work grow by asking people to participate and add their efforts.”⁵⁴ Though Ono admits that it was initially hard for her to release her instructions, thereby relinquishing her control over the final product, she became more conceptually adventurous and open as her work progressed. For example, in *Unfinished Music No. 1* of 1968, there were no given instructions beyond the title.⁵⁵

Kotz groups Ono with George Brecht, Simone Forti, and La Monte Young, as artists who made “condensed event scores or word pieces” as a kind of poetry which came into contact with experimental music and art in the late '50s and '60s. She writes that “their language is usually colloquial...consisting of deeply prosaic everyday statements...often presented without syntactic disruption, temporal formalization, or other overtly poetic devices or effects.”⁵⁶ However, Ono’s work does not fit this description, as it does not always fall within the prosaic or “everyday,” and more often than not engages the absurd and physically impossible. In *Tunafish Sandwich Piece*, featured on the back cover of *Grapefruit’s* 2000 reprint, Ono’s instructions direct the performer to engage both imagination and everyday action:

TUNAFISH SANDWICH PIECE

Imagine one thousand suns in the sky at the same time.

Let them shine for one hour.

Then, let them gradually melt into the sky.

Make one tunafish sandwich and eat.⁵⁷

In “To the Wesleyan People,” she writes that “art is not merely a duplication of life.”⁵⁸ Unlike Brecht’s *Exit*, her instruction paintings did not have the goal of enacting readymade, everyday action. In fact, she believed that art served to allow one to step outside of everyday life in our physical reality. While one could characterize Ono’s “instruction paintings” as prosaic, I would argue that Munroe’s account of her unfinished paintings as calls-to-action in the realm of idea and imagination better represents her motivations. As Munroe argues:

Ono’s scores and instruction pieces are designed to break through banal reality to recover, in an often deceptively simple act, a moment that she calls ‘wonderment.’ Like other conceptual artists of the 1960s, she uses language, but it is not language itself that is her concern, but experience...Ono has always declared that the imaginary *is* her empirical truth: ‘Idea is what the artist gives, like a stone thrown into the water for ripples to be made...instruction painting makes it possible to explore the invisible, the world beyond the existing concept of time and space. And then sometimes later, the instructions themselves will disappear and be properly forgotten.’⁵⁹

It is evident that Ono did not place emphasis on the instruction painting as a physical object, whether the text itself or the realized work. While the tripartite structure remains, especially when the printed text of the instruction paintings are exhibited—as they often are, alongside physical realizations or as standalone objects—the immaterial possibilities of the instructional concepts is the most interesting aspect for Ono.

It could be argued that the conceptual use of language as an artistic medium promotes a withdrawal from the visual, sensible, and material aspect of art, yet Ono’s paintings present the possibility for a different kind of instantiation, one in which visual objects can be perfectly rendered. Kellein argues that, in fact, the instruction paintings are not meant to be physically performed at all:

Due to the physical and psychological demands that many of them make, it seems as though it is more likely that they are meant to be felt, not performed. It is unlikely that someone could cough for an entire year...It is precisely this prediction of failure that empowers the gesture of self-

observation and examination within the framework provided by the dissolution of boundaries.⁶⁰

Indeed, Ono stated that a physical realization was unnecessary, and that a materialization existing in the mind alone could be not only sufficient, but superior:

My interest is mainly in 'painting to construct in your head.' In your head, for instance, it is possible for a straight line to exist—not as a segment of a curve as a straight line... there is no visual object that does not exist in comparison to or simultaneously with other objects, but these characteristics can be eliminated if you wish.⁶¹

Things which are only approximated in physical reality, for example, the perfect sphere, could exist in its actual, ideal form in the mind. In this sense, the object realized in the mind is more accurate than its physical counterpart.

Materialization in the mind not only allows a perfection of the object; it also allows a realization of things that are materially impossible. As Ono remarks:

I discovered that by instructionalizing art you did not have to stick to the two-dimensional or three-dimensional world. In your mind, you can be in touch with a six-dimensional world... you can also mix an apple with a desk.⁶²

On the other hand, bringing a physical object into existence suggests the permanence of the object, both in terms of material presence and interpretive direction. Ono "was against the idea of a monument...because, supposedly, it stays there forever."⁶³ Her instruction paintings allow the artwork to come to realization in peoples' minds, and in that way, the availability of her works are akin to an immaterial readymade object, rather than a readymade action or event.

Although the freedom of realization and interpretation of these immaterial objects was always in play, Ono thought of her instruction paintings as tapping into a kind of "collective unconsciousness, in that somewhere it [the instruction painting] is stimulating the message in the inspiration of it."⁶⁴ Ono's works are readymade objects in that they guide each performer to the

realization of the same immaterial object, each materializing it in their own way, but sharing the same imagination.

Yoko Ono's instruction paintings play a significant role in the historical development and creative trajectory of conceptual art. It is a misleading simplification to categorize her art as simply post-Cagean or a part of Fluxus, as she is more properly apart from Cage and is proto-Fluxus. Today, Ono's artistic enterprise is experiencing a renaissance, as she continues to create and develop conceptual work, including performances and objects stemming from her instruction paintings of the '60s and '70s. "Regardless of whether Ono's work takes the form of an instruction, an object, or a performance," Yoshimoto reminds us, "it is always intended to become a catalyst of exchange between her and her audience,"⁶⁵ and Ono stresses the importance of communication and transformation in the realization of her work and the power of collective imagination through art. Ono's instruction pieces are not the ready-made events of Brecht and Young, and they deserve to be recognized as a conceptual project distinctive from those of her peers: they are ready-made visual objects in the mind which act as a public call to action, a powerful springboard for ideas and imagination.

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Notes

¹ Arthur C. Danto. "Life in Fluxus." *The Nation*, December 18, 2000: 36.

² Alan Clayson, Barb Jungr, and Robb Johnson. *Woman: The Incredible Life of Yoko Ono*. New Malden: Chrome Dreams, 2004.

³ Lawrence Alloway. "Art as Words as Art." *The Nation*, September 7, 1970: 189.

⁴ Yoko Ono and Hans Ulrich Obrist. "Mix a Building and the Wind, New York, November 2001." In *Yoko Ono/Hans Ulrich Obrist: The Conversation Series*, by Yoko Ono. 26.

⁵ "The Message Is the Medium: The Communication Art of Yoko Ono." Chap. 3 in *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*, by Midori Yoshimoto, 79-114. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

⁶ Thomas Kellein, *Fluxus*, 62. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995.

⁷ See below for the text of this work.

⁸ Kellein, *Fluxus*, 101.

⁹ If we regard her solo exhibition at the AG Gallery in the summer of 1961 as the moment Ono entered the "art scene."

¹⁰ The second edition of *Grapefruit: A Book of Instruction and Drawings by Yoko Ono*, published in 1970, contained approximately 300 works in text and small black and white drawings from the 1960s. The current edition in print further added a couple of pieces from the early 70s. It is fair to say, then, that this collection represents the lower limit of what we may estimate to be her complete repertoire of work during this period.

¹¹ For example, *Yoko Ono: 3 Rooms*, published 1995 on the occasion of her exhibition at Galleria civica di arte contemporanea, *Yoko Ono: touch me*, from her 2008 exhibition at the Galerie Lelong, and *Yoko Ono: to the light*, published by the Serpentine Gallery in 2012.

¹² Liz Kotz. *Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*. 100.

¹³ Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score." 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 61.

¹⁵ Henry Flynt. "Essay: Concept Art." In *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, edited by La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low.

¹⁶ Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score." 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 73.

²⁰ *Ibid*. 74.

²¹ *Ibid*. 74.

²² Yoshimoto. "The Message is the Medium." 80.

²³ *Ibid*, 81.

²⁴ Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score." 77-78.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 78.

²⁶ Ono and Obrist, "Mix a Building and the Wind." 7-8.

²⁷ "Coughing is a Form of Love: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Philosopher." In *Yoko Ono: between the sky and my head*, by Yoko Ono, edited by Thomas Kellein, 148.

²⁸ Ono. "To the Wesleyan People." 737.

- ²⁹ She interestingly suggested in "To the Wesleyan People" that there could be more categories of arts than we have at the present (as opposed to the merging of art forms), including such arts as "weight,' 'taste,' 'cry.'"
- ³⁰ Ono. "To the Wesleyan People." 738-739.
- ³¹ Geoff Smith. "Composing After Cage." 8.
- ³² Ono and Obrist, "Mix a Building and the Wind." 14.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ono and Obrist, "Mix a Building and the Wind." 14-15.
- ³⁶ Yoshimoto. "The Message is the Medium." 96.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Yoko Ono. *The Other Rooms*. 159
- ³⁹ Yoko Ono. *Grapefruit*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- ⁴⁰ Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score." 80.
- ⁴¹ Kotz. 85.
- ⁴² Reproduced from the transcription of one of the notes from Fig. 3, found in Kirk Varnedoe, ed. *Jasper Johns: Writing, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*. 54.
- ⁴³ Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score." 80-81.
- ⁴⁴ Yoshimoto. *Into Performance*. 80.
- ⁴⁵ Kotz, "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score." 62.
- ⁴⁶ Ono and Obrist, "Mix a Building and the Wind." 13.
- ⁴⁷ Alexandra Munroe. "Why War? Yoko by Yoko at the Serpentine." From *To the Light*, 11.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Yoko Ono. *Grapefruit*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ono and Obrist, "Mix a Building and the Wind." 11.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid. 12.
- ⁵⁶ Liz Kotz. *Words to be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*. 100.
- ⁵⁷ Yoko Ono. *Grapefruit*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- ⁵⁸ Yoko Ono. "To the Wesleyan People." 738.
- ⁵⁹ Alexandra Munroe. "Why War? Yoko by Yoko at the Serpentine." From *To the Light*. 11. Yoko Ono quote from "Yoko Ono: instruction painting" in Yoko at Indica, Exhibition catalog, 1966.
- ⁶⁰ Kellein. "Coughing is a Form of Love: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Philosopher." 149.
- ⁶¹ Yoko Ono. "To the Wesleyan People." 737.
- ⁶² Ono-Obrist, "Mix a Building and the Wind." 17.
- ⁶³ Erica-Lynn Huberty. "Art As Creative Dialogue: An Interview with Yoko Ono." *Sculpture* 19, no. 10 (December 2000): 43.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 44.

⁶⁵ Yoshimoto. "The Message is the Medium." 114.

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Appendix

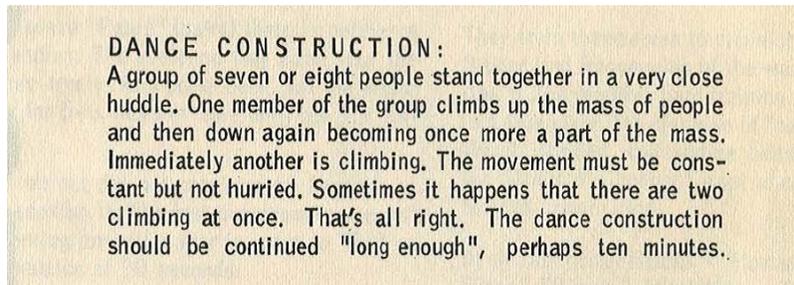
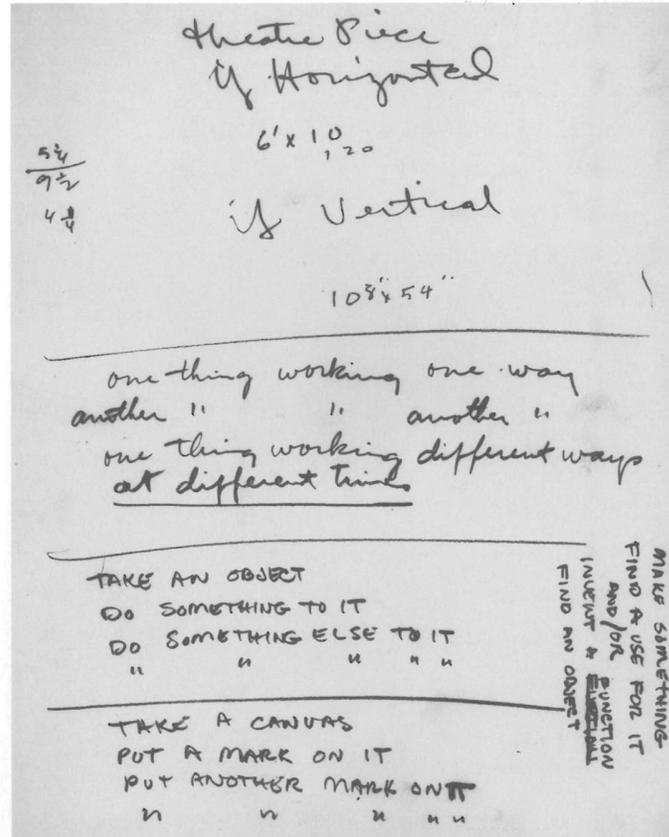


Figure 1. One of the 5 works by Simone Morris published in An Anthology. Here we see the flexibility given to the performer, in being able to decide the duration of the work; this increased space for interpretation (as compared to traditional notation) is characteristic of the event score.



5. Book A, p. 42, c. 1963-64.
Transcribed in item s-16.

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Figure 3. A page from Jasper Johns' notebook from c. 1963-64. Note the bottom two sections, the first of which ("Take and object...") is transcribed in the essay, and the second of which is thematically similar but focuses on painting. The open ended instructions of these notes are strikingly similar to the conceptual statements of Brecht, Young, and Ono.