

intersections online

Volume 10, Number 1 (Winter 2009)

Whitney Frank, "Instructions for Destruction: Yoko Ono's Performance Art," *intersections* 10, no. 1 (2009): 571-607.

ABSTRACT

What is currently known as "destruction art" originated in the artistic and cultural work of avantgarde art groups during the 1960s. In the aftermath of World War Two, the threat of annihilation through nuclear conflict and the Vietnam War drastically changed the cultural landscapes and everyday life in the United States, Asia, and Europe. In this context, "destruction art" has been situated as the "discourse of the survivor," or the method in which the visual arts cope with societies structured by violence and the underlying threat of death. Many artists involved in destruction art at this time were concerned with destroying not just physical objects, but also with performing destruction with various media. By integrating the body into conceptual works rather than literal narratives of violence, artists contested and redefined mainstream definitions of art, social relations and hierarchies, and consciousness. Yoko Ono, who was born in Tokyo in 1933 and began her work as an artist in the late 1950s, addresses destruction through conceptual performances, instructions, and by presenting and modifying objects. Ono's work is not only vital to understanding the development of the international avant garde, but it is relevant to contemporary art and society. Her attention to the internalization of violence and oppression reflects contemporaneous feminist theory that situates the female body as text and battleground. By repositioning violence in performance work, Ono's art promotes creative thinking, ultimately drawing out the reality of destruction that remains hidden within the physical and social body.

http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Winter_2009/Whitney_Frank_Yoko_Ono_Performance_Art.pdf

Fair Use Notice: The images within this article are provided for educational and informational purposes. They are being made available in an effort to advance the understanding of scientific, environmental, economic, social justice and human rights issues etc. It is believed that this constitutes a 'fair use' of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, the material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have an interest in using the included information for research and educational purposes.

Instructions for Destruction

Yoko Ono's Performance Art

By Whitney Frank
University of Washington, Seattle

Yoko Ono is famous for her avant-garde conceptual music, artworks, performances and, of course, her marriage to John Lennon.¹ She completed some of her biggest and most well-known projects with Lennon during the 1960s and 1970s. Both Ono and Lennon channeled their efforts for world peace into very public artistic, musical, and political endeavors, such as the billboards reading *War is Over (If you Want it)* and the televised Bed-Ins for Peace that started in their hotel room. She continues to campaign for peace — in 2007 she unveiled her *Imagine Peace Tower* in Reykjavík, Iceland: a wishing well from which a giant beam of light shoots toward the sky, symbolically projecting a unifying and powerful message of peace into the atmosphere. Ono is perhaps best known as the source of the Beatle's breakup and as having compelled Lennon to enter her seemingly strange world of the avant-garde. Details about her marriage with Lennon and study of their artistic collaborations reveal that this is not the case. This misunderstanding of Ono's life and work suggests that continued research and reevaluation will help further the understanding of Ono and her place within the history of performance art. I examine her work in the context of what is currently known as "destruction art," which originated in the artistic and cultural work of avant-garde art groups during the 1960s.

After World War II, and in particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, the western world was frequently reminded of both the threat of nuclear annihilation and the everyday violence of the Vietnam. Within this context, art historian Kristine Stiles situates *destruction art* as the "discourse of the survivor": the only method in which the visual arts can cope in a society structured by violence and the underlying threat of death.² Destruction art therefore becomes an ethical matter, an instance where artist-survivors attempt to expose histories and systems of violence, and reinscribe such experiences into society's current consciousness. In these terms, art production indeed becomes a matter of survival. Many artists involved in destruction art at this time were not only concerned with destroying physical objects and materials, but also with using various media to create

¹ I would like to thank Patricia Failing, professor of Art History at the University of Washington, for her guidance during this project.

² Kristine Stiles, "Survival Ethos and Destruction Art," *Discourse* 14, no. 2 (1992): 74-102.

performances that confront the very issue of destruction and violence. By integrating the body into conceptual works rather than simply performing literal narratives of violence, artists contested and redefined mainstream definitions of art, social relations and hierarchies, and consciousness.

From the beginning of her artistic career, Yoko Ono defied contemporary art conventions by exploring the power of the concept to convey aesthetic and philosophical meaning. She began studying and working as an artist in the mid-1950s, focusing on alternative models for musical scores. Soon she turned these scores into creative instructions and performances that anyone could do if their mind was open.

Throughout her body of work, Ono addresses destruction through conceptual performances, instructions, and by presenting and modifying objects. Her cultivation of fully conceptual artworks predates not only the development of “conceptual art” in form, and as discourse, but she often engages in proto-feminist commentary as well. Her attention to the internalization of violence and oppression reflects contemporaneous feminist thought that situates the female body as both text and as a battleground. By repositioning violence in performance work, Ono's art promotes creative thinking, ultimately drawing out the reality of destruction that remains hidden within the physical and social body.

The development of Ono's conceptual art and her involvement in avant-garde groups are linked with her unusual experiences in her early life living in and traveling between Japan and the United States. Ono was born in 1933 in Tokyo to mother Isoko and father Yeisuke. She grew up in well-to-do society as her parents both descended from wealthy and noble families and her father worked and traveled often for the Yokohama Specie Bank. When Ono was young, she attended exclusive schools both in Japan and the United States—she even went to school for a while with Emperor Hirohito's sons—and her father encouraged her to follow her passion for musical and artistic training. In Japanese aristocratic culture of this time, there existed an ideal model of the *literati* or *bunjin* in which “[refining] the soul” consisted of moving between “elegant pursuits” or various art forms.³ Though her artistic training was initially very formalized and rigorous, Ono's aristocratic heritage and encouragement from her parents allowed her to pursue several artistic and musical endeavors from an early age.

³ Alexandra Munroe, “Spirit of YES: the art and life of Yoko Ono”, in *Yes Yoko Ono*, eds. Alexandra Munroe, Yoko Ono, Jon Hendricks, and Bruce Altshuler (New York: Japan Society, 2000), 14.



Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*. Source: Japan Society

Exposure and participation in the cultures of both the United States and Japan also influenced Ono's relationships with artistic production. By 1941, the Ono family had moved between Japan and the United States twice because of Yeisuke's work. Art historian Midori Yoshimoto considers the stress involved with moving back and forth between two countries to have had a significant influence on Ono's developing thinking about performance art. For Yoshimoto, "the performance of a life negotiating between the private and public self may have started at that time."⁴ Living between countries and cultures resulted in a kind of "hybrid identity" for Ono, as she did not fully inhabit either realm, and was pressured to perform extremely well in order to represent Japan in the United States, or to fulfill her duties as a child of aristocrats in Japan.⁵ Although she felt encouraged to study music and art, this part of her life seemed to be scripted according to her social positioning as aristocratic outsider and foreigner.

⁴ Midori Yoshimoto, *Into performance: Japanese women artists in New York* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 81

⁵ *Ibid.*

Several art historians cite Ono's experience in Japan during World War II as not only insight into her positioning as an outsider within her home country, but also as further development of her philosophical attitudes regarding art. Yoshimoto explains that after the Ono family's home was bombed and they escaped to the countryside, "Ono experienced hardship in daily life for the first time" because in addition to the stress and fear she felt during the war, "local farmers were not hospitable to [the Onos]...ostracizing them as a rich, Americanized family."⁶ In addition to already feeling like outsiders and after witnessing Japan's devastation and surrender, local children did not accept Ono and her brother into their groups. The two would hide together and spend afternoons imagining a different life; Ono stressed that they "used the powers of visualization to survive."⁷ Here is a glimpse at the potential beginning of Ono's life-long focus on visualizations and concepts as art in them. Not only did she experience life as a constant struggle to perform, but she also utilized imagined actions and objects—indeed, replaced real life with an imagined one—to escape the effects of wartime violence, a strategy that becomes a major theme in her art.

Ono and was not alone in grappling with her position within a confusing postwar society in Japan. Several avant-garde art groups arose in Japan after the war and they brought together themes of destruction, irrationality, and political commentary in their actions, objects and performances. Art historian Shinchiro Osaki situates the development of various radical art groups in Japan in the early 1950s as part of the process of renegotiation and regeneration of art after World War Two. Artists in groups like the Gutai Art Association, Kyūshū-ha, and Group Zero built new relationships between the artist, action, and the body through innovative performance methods that reassessed the superiority of "formalist orthodoxies" of art from Europe and the United States.⁸ After a violent defeat in war and the extended American presence in Japan, artists resisted conventional art forms such as social realist work popular prior to and during the war. Japanese art groups that began to "emphatically [use] their bodies as the locus of artistic expression" greatly influenced the international avant-garde and specifically in the west where many artists were in search for new forms of expression.⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Munroe, 13.

⁸ Shinchiro Osaki, "Body and Place: Action in Postwar Art in Japan", in *Out of actions: between performance and the object, 1949-1979*, eds. Paul Schimmel and Kristine Stiles (Los Angeles, Calif: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 121.

⁹ Yoshimoto, 3.

Gutai was officially formed in 1954 and members published a journal to expose the public to their exhibitions and activities. Group Zero formed around the same time and included artists who eventually joined Gutai. Their exhibitions became more like events; the “Experimental Outdoor Modern Art Exhibition to Challenge the Burning Midsummer Sun” of 1955, for example, was held along a river and artists conducted destructive actions and creatively incorporated junk into the surroundings. The theme of construction through destruction was strong in this exhibition: Kazuo Shiraga wielded an axe and built a large log statue and Saburo Murakami ran over and tore a large canvas sheet on the ground. Such actions were radical and unparalleled at the time as the Japanese art scene had not experienced such violent performance work before.¹⁰ Later in 1955, “The First Gutai Exhibition,” held in Tokyo, continued to challenge assumptions about contemporary art with Murakami and Shiraga’s physical and destructive actions.¹¹

In addition to struggling against the assertion of Western culture and artistic practice into Japanese culture after the war, avant-garde artists were also fighting a history of government control over the art world. Yoshimoto explains that at this time in Japan, there was a gap between traditional and modern art and the influence of modern Western styles and theories produced artistic hierarchies that changed according to needs of the government and society.¹² For example, before World War II, the government promoted Western artistic developments, while during the war, such art was banned to make way for war propaganda.¹³ Young artists after the war like those involved with Gutai thus developed radical techniques to oppose and defy sanctioned art practices.

The Gutai Group’s manifesto emphasizes that artists and materials engage with each other through action. The group explains, “Gutai art does not change the material but brings it to life...the human spirit and the material reach out their hands to each other” and therefore “keeping the life of the material alive also means bringing the spirit alive.”¹⁴ For Gutai members, the artist and materials

¹⁰ Osaki, 123.

¹¹ In Shiraga’s performance *Challenging Mud*, Shiraga wrestled with a large heap of clay. In Murakami’s performance *Paper Tearing*, Murakami burst through layers of paper. Osaki explains that these two particular actions still retain a “near-mythical” status today because they were both shocking and innovative. Gutai (along with other groups in Japan) influenced the development of avant-garde groups around the world. Their performance-oriented work predates, for example, Allan Kaprow’s *happenings* and the founding of Fluxus.

¹² Yoshimoto, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Kristine Stiles, “Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions,” in *Out of actions: between performance and the object, 1949-1979*, eds. Paul Schimmel and Kristine Stiles (Los Angeles, Calif: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 237.

seem to share authorship when creating an artwork, suggesting that the both process and the final product are significant. Shiraga's *Challenging Mud*, performed at the "First Gutai Exhibition," implies that the clay actively and defiantly responds to Shiraga's full-bodied movements; both Shiraga and the clay must make efforts to create a muddy form. Stiles suggests this new relationship between the materials, the body, and the spirit became an urgent signifier of



Kazuo Shiraga, *Challenging Mud*, 1955.
Ashiya City Museum of Art History, Japan.

human existence — a means to rebirth at a time when war and expansion of nuclear weapons programs brought about mass obliteration of bodies all over the world.¹⁵ Through direct and assertive contact with each other, the artist's body and the material with which she works are enlivened; the artist does not just seek to manipulate the material in order to create an object to be viewed, but rather to bring out the life of the material through active work which, in turn, indicates that the artist too, is living. In postwar Japan, the mere

act of asserting one was *living* after the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki seemed, for these artists, to be vital to the process of recovery and renewal. The Gutai Manifesto ends with a declaration that affirms a resilient and assertive commitment to life and art: "We shall hope that there is always a fresh spirit in our Gutai exhibitions and that the discovery of new life will call forth a tremendous scream in the material itself."¹⁶

The conditions of war and its aftermath affected women artists in a similar way to men, prompting both to question what it meant for them to exist after World War II. Both women and men explored various methods to assert their existence through actions and performance work with materials. Though Gutai and Group Zero did not specifically limit the participation of women in their activities, there certainly was a lack of equal participation in art production within and outside of these avant-garde circles. Ono herself was not part of Gutai or Group Zero, as at the time they were established and became active she was attending Gakushūin University as their first female student in the philosophy department. Then in

¹⁵ Ibid., 235.

¹⁶ Jiro Yoshihara, *The Gutai manifesto, 1956*, <http://www.ashiya-web.or.jp> (accessed February 10, 2008).

1952 and after only a year at Gakushūin, Ono and her family moved back to New York and she enrolled at Sarah Lawrence to study music composition and poetry. Though she missed the developing stages of these artistic groups, they set precedence and created interest in avant-garde performance work specifically in Japan, but their innovations also influenced artists in the west. Later in the 1960s, Ono returned to Japan to further explore and execute her conceptual and performance work.

Though Gutai's membership included several women—more than other avant-garde groups in fact—Yoshimoto emphasizes that the general attitude toward women artists in Japan was that they were “at the very bottom of the social hierarchy” and were therefore scrutinized more harshly than male artists.¹⁷ Both their gender and their interest in the avant-garde arts were limiting factors in Japan. Though women's access to education and institutional began to expand after the war, there were still few institutions of higher education available to them, and women artists were viewed with contempt for “indulging themselves in an artistic hobby.”¹⁸ A woman's *role* in society had little to do with art—at the university, as a profession, or for recreation—in that artistic production would take away from their duties to the family and state.

Ono's father Yeisuke was passionate about music and he happily structured his daughter's early education around rigorous formal training in music,¹⁹ but later discouraged her from being a composer because that field was “too hard for women.”²⁰ Ono was restricted to certain types of training and artistic pursuits deemed appropriate to her gender and her social position. Even in the face of inequalities in attitudes, treatment, and access to resources and education that made artistic and economic success difficult for women in Japan's avant-garde, artists like Atsuko Tanaka and Takako Saito achieved some degree of success. Both, however, moved to New York to strive for greater success.

Saito and other immigrant artists like Shigeko Kubota and Mieko Shiomi moved from Japan to the United States in the early 1960s and became involved with Fluxus, founded by George Maciunas. An avant-garde coalition of artists, composers, and designers, Maciunas monitored the group membership, ejecting those who did not seem to commit to Fluxus ideals. He invited the newcomers from Japan to take part in Fluxus activities and productions, as there was mutual

¹⁷ Yoshimoto, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹ Munroe, 14.

²⁰ Yoshimoto, 81.

feeling that Fluxus was a space compatible with the work of groups like Gutai. Though Maciunas was demanding and often imposed his own ideas on group members, Saito viewed Fluxus more so as an opportunity to “[explore] her artistic direction rather than as a full commitment to the group.”²¹ The word “Fluxus” itself indicates a state of fluctuation and change and its membership and production changed over time. It is therefore difficult to absolutely define all characteristics typical of the group's art.

Similar to Gutai's opposition of past art forms and the influence of modern Western art, Fluxus art is positioned against established notions of artistic genius associated with western Modernism and Abstract Expressionism. Fluxus does this by inhabiting realms somewhere between materiality and thought, where there is no apparent demarcation of what constitutes life and what counts as art.²² Therefore, Fluxus artists did not create any paintings or other traditional gallery objects, but rather focused on inviting the viewer, the environment, or a group of performers to participate in the creation of art, allowing for an array of outcomes and a multitude of interpretations. They produced films, performances, installations, mail art, books, and boxes of objects in an effort to reveal the “non-existent visible in life” by facilitating experiences that combine the subject and the object.²³ Their experiential work was intended to be non-precious and ephemeral and to have transformational power; if art originates within life, then art like life, will change and fade as life constantly changes and will eventually end.

Ono began creating “event scores” several years before she became involved with Fluxus officially. Around 1956, Ono became acquainted with soon-to-be Fluxus members through her first husband, musician Toshi Ichianagi, as well as John Cage, one of the most influential musicians and Fluxist theorists. Frustrated with the restrictions of conventional music scores, Ono began creating work that included poetry and instructions such as *Secret Piece* (1953) in which the performer chooses one note to play and plays it in the woods “with the accompaniment of the birds singing at dawn.”²⁴ Conventional music scores restrict the inclusion of natural sounds, imagination, and the chance encounters and incidents that, for Ono, make up a piece of music. The instructional quality

²¹ Ibid., 120.

²² Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: the history of an attitude* (San Diego, CA: San Diego State University Press, 1998), 235.

²³ Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 20.

²⁴ Yoshimoto, 82.

of this score make it seem more like an event that anyone can perform, not just a traditionally trained musician.

Her event instructions and her perspectives on music and performance meshed with Fluxus, as artists became increasingly invested in performance activities like Allan Kaprows's *happenings*. Happenings became multi-media evenings where any number of artists and audience members participated in scripted or improvised actions. Fluxus was influenced by happenings and was also shaped by Cage's revolutionary musical work and deep interest in Zen philosophies. Instead of composing music according to traditional methods, Cage utilized unusual means that included chance (as sometimes dictated by the *I-Ching*), periods of silence, and interruptive noise. In his piece for piano, *4'33"* (1952), a performer steps on stage, opens the piano, then sits on the bench silently for exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds, and finally closes the piano and exits the stage. Sounds that happened during the performance made up the composition and could include coughing, the rustling audience, traffic, birds—anything from real life. Cage's goal for this piece (and his *modus operandi* in general) was to "[wake people] up to the very life we're living". In *4'33"*, Cage turned the audience into active participants as their sounds made up the music.²⁵ His desire to "wake up" audiences and include their authorship in an artwork derives from theories of Zen and its accompanying aesthetics.

Zen artists focused on individual understanding through meditation, separation from rationality through the use of space and reductive graphics, and the search for universal understandings deriving from individual experience and meditation.²⁶ Cage and Fluxus artists defied traditional Western artistic doctrines because they were interested in exploring the area between art and life. By transgressing its boundaries and conflating the two — through the inclusion of raw, personal experience— lay the potential to discover universal meanings. Cage's influence on artists associated with Fluxus and its philosophy should not be underestimated. Ono recognized that Cage's investment in Zen philosophy and acknowledgement of her Japanese heritage helped her open new paths for artistic exploration.²⁷

In 1960, Ono hosted performances by Fluxus artists at her Chambers Street loft where artists like La Monte Young, Ichiyanagi, and Jackson MacLow were able

²⁵ Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the fifties: interaction in art between east and west* (Zwolle: Uitgeverij Waanders, 1997), 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36,

²⁷ Yoshimoto, 84.

to present experimental works. According to Yoshimoto the events in Ono's loft "proved to be quite influential because [they] inspired George Maciunas to organize his own concert series, which became the base for Fluxus."²⁸ She was therefore an integral part of the development of Fluxus and was in a position of reciprocal, artistic inspiration.

The compatibility between Ono and her newly found community of artists, however, did not guard against experiences of sexism within and outside of the group. During the Chambers Street performances, Ono was regarded by many of her peers as merely the owner of the loft, not an independent artist. Ono believes that she was not taken seriously because she was a woman: "Most of my friends were all male and they tried to stop me being an artist. They tried to shut my mouth."²⁹ Despite the availability of education, an artistic community, and resources, like other women artists in Japan, Ono struggled with sexism. Furthermore, Ono inhabited the position as a "double-outsider;" in addition to living in between the cultures of Japan and the United States, she holds double-outsider status within the U.S. because she is an Asian woman. Just as her "friends" had tried to discourage her from making art, the press was also as unfriendly, regarding her attempts to assert herself in a male-dominated field and her later relationship with John Lennon as overly aggressive and opportunistic.³⁰ Ono defied societal conventions that regulated the behavior of women of color in the United States. She did not hide her heritage or ascribe to cultural stereotyping and was determined to showcase her conceptual art works despite negative press.

Stiles observes that Ono's life between and outside of cultural groups informs her art, manifested in the manner Ono constructs the body and mind as a dichotomy. Through her conceptual instructions, she creates events as analogs for passing from one experiential sphere to another, from one conceptual plane to another. In them, she sought aesthetic melding as a process and means for perceptually transcending the boundaries of material phenomena in order to gain an epiphany, thereby transforming conditions of Being.³¹ Recalling the time in Ono's childhood when she and her brother played imaginative games to escape

²⁸ Ibid., 85.

²⁹ Ibid., 86.

³⁰ Kristine Stiles. "Unbosoming Lennon: The Politics of Yoko Ono's Experience," *Art Criticism* 7 (Spring 1992): 21-52.

³¹ Kristine Stiles. "Being Undyed: The Meeting of Mind and Matter in Yoko Ono's Events", in *Yes Yoko Ono*, eds. Alexandra Munroe, Yoko Ono, Jon Hendricks, and Bruce Altshuler (New York: Japan Society, 2000), 147.

their life in the countryside during World War II, Ono creates conceptual artworks to transcend societal boundaries that restrict thinking, living, and art production. Anyone can execute her instructions, if only the mind can allow the imagination to run free; the body will inevitably follow. Her works provide a means to change the self and society because they require creatively thinking outside of society's conventions and then inventing one's own.

Ono began creating instructions and performances in New York during the mid-1950s. She had felt she had more freedom to investigate these methods outside of college and therefore left Sarah Lawrence. Alongside Fluxus and work by other avant-garde artists, Ono developed her own style of performances that she called "events"—an effort to differentiate them from the happenings that were becoming popular at the time. Ono's own description of her early events as more like a "wish or hope" than strictly an evening of performance, which may seemingly have little to do with the concept of "destruction art." Wishing and hoping are optimistic activities that involve excitement, good feelings, and luck. However, wishing or hoping often originate from devastating circumstances that cause a person to desperately wish for improvement, as there may perhaps be no plausible means for an individual to change the circumstances.

Ono's work — her texts, and her objects and her performances — have origins in negative experiences of her past — and it is in this context that her work exemplifies what art historian Kristine Stiles refers to as "destruction art," which "is the visual corollary to the discourse of the survivor" and "the only attempt in the visual arts to grapple seriously with both the technology of actual annihilation and the psychodynamics of virtual extinction."³² Not only does Ono incorporate physical and conceptual destruction in much of her work, but themes of healing, connection and communication between people and nature and imagination also position her body of work under the realm of destruction art.

Stiles positions her model of destruction art within a social and historical analysis to explain the aesthetic tendencies of destruction artists. Specifically relating to Ono's experiences, Stiles views the violence of World War II and its protracted aftermath in the Cold War era as examples of how society, worldwide, fostered a "genocidal mentality." During times of international conflict, nearly everything in a nation is restructured: the economy, educational system, industry, advertising, and employment could all be altered to meet the demands of war.

³² Stiles, "Survival Ethos and Destruction Art," 76.

This total restructuring of life was more extreme than ever: new technologies such as state-of-the-art air planes and atomic bombs were used in World War II, redefining modern warfare and the lengths to which violence could reach. Stiles emphasizes that the experience of such tremendous violence results not only in societal systems that focus on “the destruction of all life,” but also cultures that exhibit “dissociative behavior” like “psychic numbing...disavowal, and denial” to cope with an all-pervading sense of destruction.³³

For Stiles this “genocidal mentality” necessarily denotes the destruction artist’s status as a survivor and includes a range of survivor experiences regarding literal and social death and destruction. She describes their artistic processes as creation via destruction, which becomes a means of reducing the “psychic stress...to combat the threat to survival” that pervades everyday workings and the structure of many societies in the post-World War Two and nuclear eras.³⁴ During this time, the threat of annihilation through nuclear conflict in the aftermath of World War Two, and the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s greatly changed the cultural landscapes and everyday life in the United States, Asia, and Europe. In addition to major international conflicts, survivor-artists deal with destructive or violent events from their personal lives as well.

The combination personal history with social commentary was expressed within this genre by the use of diverse variety of media, style, presentation, and level of violence. A comparison of Murakami’s work with that of Ono’s illustrates the possible modes of expression found in destruction art. In Murakami’s *At One Moment Opening Six Holes* (1955), he rapidly punched through large paper stretched over frames, while Ono’s work *Pencil Lead Piece* (1962) requires the participant to imagine that pencil lead fills her or his head, then destroy it and finally, tell someone about the destruction she or he experienced. Both of these works differ greatly in their suggestion and expression of violence. Though many of Ono’s pieces either require participants to destroy something or an object itself might already be destroyed, Ono focused her events and instructions primarily on the imaginary destroying of objects, ideas, institutions, and sometimes even people. In *Painting to Hammer a Nail* (left), viewers used the hammer attached to a wood panel to hammer in nails in any way they wanted. This act would typically be viewed as destroying a piece of art, the act of hammering also signifies creation in the building of an object, and thus Ono creates a new and collaborative artwork. Similarly, *Smoke Piece* (1964), asks participants to “Smoke everything you can. Including your pubic hair.” This piece

³³ Ibid., 74.

³⁴ Ibid., 75.

is about conceptual destruction of both the material surroundings and the self, and like *Painting to Hammer a Nail*, the creation of art is possible through the destructive act.



Yoko Ono, *Painting to Hammer a Nail*, 1961/66. Painted wood panel, nails, painted hammer, chain. Photo by John Bigelow Taylor. Source: Japan Society

Whether relaying a traumatic experience from their past or embodying destruction from another sector of society, Ono and Murakami act as survivors, both through their testimony of their performances. Stiles explains that through presentation of questions regarding destruction, artists “[bear] witness to the tenuous conditionality of survival,” which therefore makes them act as or become survivors themselves.³⁵ By interrogating the means of destruction and survival, artists in effect, produce new ways to combat or deal with violence, sharing this knowledge through their artwork. Both *At One Moment* and *Pencil Lead Piece* attain creation through the destruction, imaginary or actual. Like his fellow Gutai members, Murakami

“intended [his] actions to result in the creation of paintings.”³⁶ Though Gutai’s destructive actions resulted in innovative artworks, they differ from Ono’s work because they were mainly solitary acts that had explicit endings. Ono, however, did not intend for her works or events to have a static presentation or ending, but rather she approaches art-making “as a *practice*, an unfinished *process* of concept transmission.”³⁷ Her openness and creativity allow for collaboration, a variety of outcomes, and the spectator’s use of the imagination. Ono’s employment of these strategies indeed makes “wish and hope” an accurate description of her work and events. By expressing a concept through simple actions or instructions, she facilitates creation through the destruction, which often results in affirmation. She allows participants to turn a public performance with violent undertones or actions into intimate introspection that art historian Alexandra Munroe calls “mental freedom.”³⁸

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Osaki, 125-6.

³⁷ Munroe, 13.

³⁸ Ibid.

Discovering and experiencing this “mental freedom” is a vital part of Ono’s destruction art. This freedom can be realized through her artworks that directly deal with the violence and destruction permeating society in overt and subtle ways, as they encourage participants to open the mind to new and seemingly impossible possibilities. By working as a collective, Ono and her participants create connection and understanding that facilitates liberation.

Though Ono’s family was able to avoid much of the violence Japan experienced during World War Two, Ono came of age in the aftermath of the war, a time that involved radical changes, confusion, and conflict. Initially in Japan, the devastation of war created a “post-surrender psyche of exhaustion, remorse, and despondency, an outpouring of relief, optimism, and liberation” flourished and eventually produced “a spirit of freedom and openness unprecedented in modern Japanese society.”³⁹ Acknowledging the openness that developed is not to ignore the protests against the postwar Americanization of Japanese society that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s, but rather to emphasize the pervasiveness of the experience of war and how remarkably Japanese society overcame such devastation and fostered creativity. In regards to the conditions of life during an era of unparalleled globalization, Ono herself asserted that the world “need[s] more skies than coke.”⁴⁰

Destruction artists or “survivors” utilize experiences—some personal, some affecting society at large—and direct them towards and out from the physical body. According to Stiles, the survivor discourse of destruction art entails “present[ing] the „imagery of extinction“ localized in the body” as artists “recapitulate the technological conditions, effects, processes, and epistemologies of terminal culture” she describes as maintaining a “genocidal mentality.”⁴¹ Through demonstration and by spreading awareness, destruction artists use their bodies as a means for understanding and recreating the experience of violence and hope to influence society to enact positive changes to curb destructive activity. Localizing destruction performances in the body emphasizes not only the literal effects of violence on the individual body but it also alludes to how society violently conditions and organizes individuals and groups. Performances can be overtly brutal to match outrageous violent events such as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or they can be more contemplative exercises in understanding destructive activities in the realms of the personal and political.

³⁹ Munroe, 15.

⁴⁰ Yoko Ono, *Imagine Yoko* (Lund, Sweden: Bakhall, 2005), 101

⁴¹ Stiles. “Survival Ethos and Destruction Art,” 76.

Ono's *Blood Piece* (1960) for example, is both explicitly violent as well as intimate, as she instructs participants to paint with their blood:

BLOOD PIECE

Use your blood to paint.

Keep painting until you faint. (a)

Keep painting until you die. (b)⁴²

Painting with one's own blood is simultaneously a deeply personal act, as the artist uses a foundational substance of life to paint, and an extremely violent act as death is the final stroke of the painting. Ono of course, did not intend for people to literally complete this instruction; but she herself originally composed *Blood Piece* with her pricked finger.⁴³

This piece also relates to Fluxus values and practice because with her instruction to paint with one's own blood, Ono illuminates the absurdity of being so serious about art production that one is willing to die for it—a seriousness projected in Western modern art and the source of Fluxus's counternarrative. *Blood Piece* is a macabre demonstration that shows how anyone can become an artist since the tools are already within each person. In this case, it is not natural talent running through an artist's veins that makes them worthy of recognition, but rather the blood, a basic feature of life all humans share, is an artistic medium worth exploring. While Fluxus values insist upon obscuring the boundaries that separate life from art, Ono uses the body and its interior functions in her instructions to “[direct] interplay between internal concepts (manifest in words) and external actions (the actual events...)” so that living things and life experiences can be used to illustrate artistic work.⁴⁴

In this case, Ono locates artistic practice and an encounter with violence within a life-sustaining element not to express the view that life and art are the same, but rather to demonstrate the transformative powers of violence: the artist is no longer living by the end of the painting. In a related instruction, *Beat Piece* (1963), Ono asks participants to simply “Listen to a heart beat.” Though there is no element of violence here, Ono again focuses her audiences on a basic component of life through intimate contact, drawing attention to the meaningful

⁴² Ono, *Grapefruit*.

⁴³ Barbara Haskell and John G. Handardt, *Yoko Ono: arias and objects* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1991), 19.

⁴⁴ Stiles. “Being Undyed”, 145.

potential of the body itself. *Beat Piece* demonstrates Ono's insistence that since life is experienced as a fusion of sensations, her art must conversely focus upon isolating sensory experiences.⁴⁵ She requests that participants stop all other actions to focus solely on this often overlooked but continuous phenomenon to facilitate an isolated sensory experience central to the body. Ono isolates a beating heart from other physical events and if for only a short while, separates the participant from any other activity to concentrate on this action. She again demonstrates how people can utilize the body for artistic performances as it is constantly in action whether or not the mind is conscious of it.

Ono often envisions life and death as a continuous circuit played out again and again over time and throughout her work, she explores how individuals as social beings experience and remember violence and death. The premise of Stiles' conception of society's "genocidal mentality" suggests that although collective social experiences like war impact the social structure of culture in a general way, individuals will inevitably be impacted and react differently to one another. Ono's art calls for interaction and confrontation with the self and society and therefore raises awareness about violence that may be hidden within societal institutions or is experienced by only certain cultural sectors. *Blood Piece* prefaces Ono's later involvement with Lennon in peace actions concerning the Vietnam War, as the letting of blood recalls the practice of sacrificing life for a national cause. Their world-wide Christmas billboard campaigns, "War is over (if you want it)," demonstrate the role of individuals within larger circumstances: here they emphasize that people can make the decision themselves to stop something as destructive as war. The public and noticeable quality of billboards emphasizes Ono and Lennon's point that individual actions become more powerful as more and more people take action. Unlike the message Ono and Lennon proclaim in their billboards, people engaging in war must follow orders and protocols and have little room to make individual decisions outside of the rules. War itself is *supposed* to unite people against a common enemy and at the outset of conflict; participants certainly know that some will die. As in Ono's instructions for destruction, soldiers volunteer knowing there is a possibility of being killed and must continue fighting even while others die or until they get injured or die themselves. One purpose for engaging in a destructive activity like war is that it will eventually facilitate peace—another instance of creation via a route of destruction. Death in war is therefore valorized, viewed as a selfless act made for national interests. In *Blood Piece*, death would be a result of obsessive and

⁴⁵ Ono, *Imagine Yoko*, 109.

subversive behavior, a gross overestimation in the name of art practice. The outcome becomes absurd in both scenarios.

Though destruction art and Ono's pieces are often located in the body, the body in and of itself does not constitute the artwork. In her January 1966 meeting address, "To the Wesleyan People," Ono discusses philosophies of her art and continually emphasizes the interconnectivity of different aspects of life. Ono further discusses her continual endeavor to facilitate isolated sensory experiences, "which is something rare in daily life," because she believes that "art is not merely a duplication of life. To assimilate art in life is different from art duplicating life".⁴⁶ Her performances and instructions may include aspects of daily life, such as writing, a heartbeat, or conversing with others, but these actions are not merely glorified replications of routine events. Although she composed instructions that seem straight-forward, they require participants to step outside of the routine and focus on one action or concept in order to experience a new level of awareness. *Blood Piece* and *Beat Piece* do not simply draw attention to aspects of life and the body "for art's sake," but they push the participant to further contemplate the potential radiating meanings of a close encounter with the body. Like destruction artworks in general, Ono's pieces "operate both as a representation *and* a presentation, an image *and* an enactment of effacement that recalls but also gives substance" to experience, personal understandings, feelings, and all things hidden within the body.⁴⁷ It can be exceedingly difficult to express feelings regarding experiences of violence, especially if the violence is institutional rather than an overt event or if it makes the person feel shame. Thus, such experiences become forgotten and disappear into the body—either that of the individual or of the collective—or the bodies and identities themselves disappear.

Instead of keeping violent experiences hidden and thus, allowing them to vanish from the landscape of discourse and consciousness, Stiles explains that destruction art "reinscribes the psyche of the social body with a memory of the finite which must function as an affective agent in the reaggregation of a survivalist consciousness."⁴⁸ Here, the term "finite" refers to memory and recognition of the experience of destruction and its causes and effects. Through use of the individual body and physical actions, Ono relates collective memory and experience to that of the individual. For example, Ono's *Shadow Piece* (1966), performed at the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) in London in

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Stiles, "Survival Ethos and Destruction Art", 80.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

September 1966, and illustrates the relationships among individuals, society, and violence. Onto a long cloth she traced the bodies of twenty participants in an area that was bombed during World War II and their outlines left eerie reminders of citizens who died in the war. Stiles directly connects this performance with the “imprints of bodies left on the sidewalks of Hiroshima after the bomb,” explaining that the drawn figures become “negative double[s]” of the actual bodies of those that died.⁴⁹ War is a social and international conflict and is mainly discussed in large terms, as in how many thousands can be committed to or died in a campaign, how much money each player spends, and how supplies are produced in factories and moved en masse. In *Shadow Piece*, Ono pares down the discussion to specifically focus how war impacts individuals. Through body performance, Ono gives an imagined voice to those who died and can no longer share their experiences, keeping them from disappearing from the social body. Destruction art like *Shadow Piece* pulls up histories of devastation and violence—recently occurring or otherwise—and recreates them in the present, which repositions them in current consciousness. Ono emphasizes this point when she discusses how art can directly focus on past events in order to enhance consciousness in the present when she states:

The mind is omnipresent, events in life never happen alone and the history is forever increasing its volume. The natural state of life and mind is complexity. At this point, what art can offer... is an absence of complexity, a vacuum through which you are led to a state of complete relaxation of the mind. After that you may return to the complexity of life again, it may not be the same, or it may be, or you may never return.⁵⁰

Ono acknowledges several important points related to destruction art theory in this statement. First, though events in history technically occurred in the past, they are not suddenly lopped off of the tail of historical time to make room for new events to occur. Rather, she implies that new events occur with respect to past histories, which makes life and thought complex. Furthermore, she suggests that events in history are witnessed and remembered by *some* people, though not all. Referring back to Stiles' initial analysis, destruction art serves as a means to recall hidden violations against humans and relocate those histories in performance or actions with the body. According to Ono, once such histories become clear via the focus of an artistic event, participants could potentially be changed forever. By calling attention to the tendency to forget or overlook past experiences, *Shadow Piece* becomes a statement against war and the excessive

⁴⁹ Stiles. “Being Undyed”, 168.

⁵⁰ Ono, *Imagine Yoko*, 110.

death it brings; it is an appeal to the memories of individuals and society to remember such suffering so that it could be stopped from happening again. In this case, the death Ono refers to is most likely linked to Japan and World War II, but the destruction continued on in the Vietnam War as more people were reduced to mere shadows by napalm.

Ono's version of destruction art shows how violence invades and combines the public and private spheres — or as in the case with *Shadow Piece*, the individual and society. *Announcement Piece I* (1962) demonstrates her awareness of the inevitable relationships between the past and present and also with the living and dead and she again situates individual actions within a larger social group. The instruction reads as follows:

ANNOUNCEMENT PIECE I

Give death announcements each time you
move instead of giving announcements of
the change of address.

Send the same when you die.⁵¹

Ono's prompt to repeatedly produce "death announcements" functions as an attempt to "reinscribe" the present with the experience of death—death itself only lasts a mere moment and therefore always occurs in the past. However, the very act of giving a death announcement to a friend is also a comical activity; it seems as if Ono is taking a jab at how seriously society engages with death. If Ono indeed believes that a "genocidal mentality" structures reality, then one creative way to escape it is through humor. Here, she makes society's obsession with destruction seem ridiculous.

Destruction artists also combat this "genocidal mentality" by directly drawing attention to modes of violence and devastation as well as to their appropriate place in current discourse. A member of the Gutai Group believed that as a citizen of post-war Japan, he could deal with the experience of extreme violence and "keep the spirit alive" by "keeping the life of the material alive;" destruction performance and actions were therefore a method of reconciliation and renewal.⁵² Similarly, in *Announcement Piece I*, Ono stresses that the experience of death is tangible, unexpected, and is not necessarily limited to physical demise. Moving and the "change of address" could be metaphors for moving within social

⁵¹ Ono, *Grapefruit*.

⁵² Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions", 237.

categories, such as when people hide part of themselves in an attempt to pass for white or straight, or when groups are targets for violence and marginalization. What dies in this case, is identity or social status and it then becomes vital that the deceased announce their loss and need for assistance. This is not unlike the experience of Japanese citizens during World War II, where cities were completely destroyed and American soldiers, culture, and values influenced how Japan developed its culture and government after the war.

Though the goal of destruction art is to incorporate lost memories, histories, and experiences of violation into current consciousness, a literal reinscribing of the past in terms of writings is at odds with destruction art practice, according to Stiles. Language and writing miss the expressive quality of performing destruction as well as its potential to be transformative. Stiles explains that destruction artists resist extensive use of language because linguistic expression is an abstract representation of events that necessarily displaces or fails to capture essential qualities of an experience; in this way, language “unwittingly contribute[s] to the perpetuation of the destructive epistemology of Western culture.”⁵³ Written accounts of violations and death separate the event from the present moment, making them seem distant and less real. Performance, on the other hand, simultaneously encompasses broader contexts and specific moments in time, as well as private and public experience. Situating the body (the personal *and* private) in the public sphere of events transforms the act because it is “self-consciously realized in the public arena as collective social intervention and political action.”⁵⁴ Here, the body provides a concrete signifier of the seemingly intangible experiences and histories as its physicality or its absence demonstrates the transformation of consciousness. If only for fleeting moments, the body becomes the “text” and bodily performance—by using something that everyone has—unites participants and makes tangible ephemeral and concealed experiences. Furthermore, the experience and expression of pain fundamentally destroys the imagined separation between the body and communication through art. Pain necessarily destroys language because it evokes a “reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”⁵⁵ The performance of pain and destruction may be prompted by writing, but grasping the pain itself as a concept, feeling, and experience, requires a renegotiation in a new space where body, text, and history are fused.

⁵³ Stiles, “Survival Ethos and Destruction Art”, 82.

⁵⁴ Stiles, “Unbosoming Lennon”, 37.

⁵⁵ Stiles, “Survival Ethos and Destruction Art”, 89.

To reach this imaginary space, Ono explains that people must shed the “artificial,” the “man-made framework” of life that floods our consciousness with made-up truths; she therefore reasons that only by “[assigning] the most fictional rules...may we possibly transcend our consciousness.”⁵⁶ Assigning rules seems to be the opposite of imaginative and open performance, and it may seem as if she is merely grounding her artworks under more constrictions. Her intentions with these rules, however, are to counterbalance the seemingly arbitrary laws and codes of conduct that force experiences like violence and understanding of society’s “genocidal mentality” to hide within the collective and individual unconscious. In this way, Ono’s rules and instructions themselves become artistic action, democratic performances that challenge assumptions about everyday life and provide a means for achieving new senses of reality. Allocating rules like her simple, repetitive, and fanciful instructions draws stark attention to the physical actions and the sensations and thoughts that they provoke. Deeply rooted emotion and memories may burst or trickle to the surface through these actions, potentially calling for creation of new and potentially life-changing communication, discourse, and action by those who participate

Ono focuses her work on the rendering or expression of concepts in order to achieve a different level of consciousness for herself, participants, and audiences. By resisting the conceptualized forms of consciousness—which she refers to as “fabricated”—that dominate society and following her own made-up rules instead, Ono believes that “conceptual reality finally becomes a concrete reality [through] an enactment of an intrusive, and therefore destructive, outside force.”⁵⁷ Recognizing and destroying fabrications that rule life allows new understandings of realities—and new realities themselves—to flourish. For example, Ono’s *Kite Piece I* and *II* (1963) demonstrate her opposition to the museum’s domination of art as well as the possibility of breaking free from this tradition and developing new artistic concepts. Like Fluxus practice, for Ono the museum was a space to be redefined or destroyed. In *Kite Piece I*, Ono asks participants to “borrow the *Mona Lisa*” and fashion it into a kite, then fly it so high that it disappears into just a dot.⁵⁸ This action changes the function and status of the *Mona Lisa* as one of the most popular and revered works in Western art history and Ono suggests that it has potential to do more than just hang in a

⁵⁶ Ono, *Imagine Yoko*, 115-117.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁸ Gutai members carried out a similar performance in which they flew an abstract expressionist painting over a Tokyo department store. In both the Gutai action and Ono’s instruction, the artists created defiant actions in order to position themselves as free from the dominance of art tradition. The outrageous suggestions in the *Kite Piece* instructions match the radical nature of Gutai’s action.

gallery. The act of flying it like a kite is whimsical and celebrates its freedom from traditional and restrictive environment and allowed to become more than just an object at which to simply look.

Kite Piece II has similar instructions, but this piece is more ritualistic than the first version. First, Ono instructs participants to “collect old paintings such as De Kooning, Klein, and Pollock” on the same day each year. Then they must be made into kites and flown and once they are high in the sky, the strings are cut to let them float.⁵⁹ When she calls work by Abstract Expressionists old, she was making a distinction between avant-garde conceptual work she and her contemporaries created and the formerly ground-breaking abstract canvases. Though they were at one time more radical than formal academic work and indeed, opened the field for the inclusion of action and new visual forms, work by De Kooning and Pollock remain trapped on the canvas. Though Ono implies that these paintings could remain part of the collective consciousness as they hover overhead, in her view (a view shared by Fluxus), the nature of this art is too subjective. It derives from “the accumulation of „distortion“ owing to one’s slanted view,” or a “fictional order” on canvas. By offering conceptual and introspective performances that require group action, Ono presents a way to escape this fabricated reality.⁶⁰ Thus, the museum and the canvas’s place within it are arbitrary inventions and Ono invites the idea that a Pollock painting can be more than just a *Pollock*; in the *Kite* performances, people can simply visualize a different reality and together, make the visualizations real. Through shared authorship, there are a potentially endless number of ways that art can be envisioned; the museum and the canvas are just two of many possibilities.

Both installments of *Kite Piece* emphasize destructive and imagined action as the means to constructing new realities and in this case, new understandings and relationships with art production. Ono connects with the goals of avant-garde groups working in Japan in her effort to open up the field of art production to include new varieties of performance, actions, music, paintings, et cetera. Osaka contrasts the developments of the Japanese and American avant-garde of the 1950s, explaining that in Japan action and “physical expression had an [overwhelming] superiority” and though Pollock made paintings with violent movements and gestures, they instead became “highly valued for their visual quality.”⁶¹ The canvases of artists like Pollock and de Kooning often included

⁵⁹ Ono, *Grapefruit*.

⁶⁰ Ono, *Imagine Yoko*, 119.

⁶¹ Osaka, 154.

explosive imagery and emotion, but the end result was still a formalized art piece hanging on a wall.

Though Gutai artists technically endeavored to make “paintings” and used this term to describe their work, they redefined what painting was, insisting, through works like Murakami’s *At One Moment Opening Six Holes*, that action and explicit bodily expression should be manifest in painting. Despite the *action* of painting and their expressive and often electrifying visual gestures, Pollock’s paintings were static once they were finished. Paintings by Gutai artists on the other hand, were meant to embody physical expression and were often enigmatic and ephemeral, therefore making it difficult for critics to define “within the framework of formalism.”⁶² Similarly, Ono attempted to release contemporary conceptions of art from their bonds to the museum and “fabricated” rules about the production of art, suggesting that an artwork does not have to have a discernible end. Instead, her own rules make a new and more authentic consciousness available for anyone willing to simply read her instructions and visualize or carry out the results.

Through collaborative actions and use of the body in performance and as a text, the introspective qualities of Ono’s work provide paths to reaching concreteness through theoretical abstraction. Her instructions and performance pieces present participants with concrete directions for imaginative and sometimes impossible actions, such as “Give death announcements each time you move.” Other pieces are completely unfeasible and Ono intends for participants to just imagine carrying out the actions, like destroying a museum. Whether or not the action must be in part imagined, or can actually be carried out, the instructions prompt participants to consider new and imaginative interrelations between the self and society. Even imaginary concrete actions can enable participants to reach a greater plane of consciousness where it is possible to destroy a painting by Klein or Pollock without getting arrested. Theoretical destruction potentially leads to a redefining of life and thought, which can return participants back to the concreteness of everyday life—although, Ono cannot determine whether or not they will live it differently than before. In her *Sense Piece* (1968), she proclaims that “Common sense prevents you from thinking. Have less sense and you will make more sense.” Despite the propensity to accept conventional ways of thinking and living, these tendencies can be overcome through creative and seemingly irrational visualizations of society and the self.

⁶² Ibid.

Dynamic openness and merging of the body and mind through Ono's imaginative and conceptual performances like *Kite Piece* or *Blood Piece* constitutes what performance art historian Sally Banes describes as the "effervescent, grotesque body." This understanding of the body, developed in a number of site within the 1960s avant-garde, challenges traditional restrictions that classify bodily functions as too disgusting for society to openly discuss. According to Banes, the effervescent and grotesque body is "literally open to the world" and has "permeable boundaries;" qualities that allow it to "[poke] holes in the decorum and hegemony of official culture."⁶³ This conception of the body fits with Ono's conceptual treatment of the physical and imaginary. In both cases, the body is used to undermine society's conventions, is free to mingle with other people and things, and can access deeper recesses of life that have been forced to remain locked in the body. Banes' observations coincide with Stiles' analysis because Stiles positions destruction art as simultaneously ethical and subversive; artists use the body to openly critique violent and oppressive ideologies, histories, and societal practices.⁶⁴ Ono's frequent focus on the need for intimate communication and connection with others indicates that her version of destruction art is indeed an ethical venture. Like *Announcement Piece I*, Ono's score for *Conversation Piece* (1962) addresses the need to share intimate 659 experiences like suffering through outward action and bodily performance. The instructions read:

CONVERSATION PIECE (or Crutch Piece)

Bandage any part of your body.

If people ask about it, make a story
and tell.

If people do not ask about it, draw
their attention to it and tell.

If people forget about it, remind
them of it and keep telling.

Do not talk about anything else.⁶⁵

This understanding of the body as open and flexible would allow others to present and discuss physical wounds, connecting the external and internal experiences of pain. Stiles writes that Ono employs bandaging techniques to

⁶³ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: avant-garde performance and the effervescent body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 192.

⁶⁴ Stiles, "Survival Ethos and Destruction Art", 77.

⁶⁵ Ono., *Grapefruit*.

“articulate her psycho-physical pain...[and] the unspeakable conditions of interior life;” therefore the body becomes a personal and historical text and using it in performance is a way to “repossess and recover a sense of the concreteness of personal experience.”⁶⁶ Because it will draw attention and prompt commentary, the bandaged body or body part is in effect a badge that helps bearers share their intimate experiences. Ono stresses that continued conversations are vital for reconciliation; sufferers of physical and emotional stress might forever live with painful memories, but others around them might forget the painful experience or be unaware of its continued significance. Participants can even make up a story about the bandages, which suggests that outsiders to specific traumatic events can embody the victims’ experiences and perform them in order to raise awareness. The bandage points to interior histories and places them onto the skin where they can be examined and shared. Collaborative action and performance becomes a way to deal with deeply rooted and disturbing issues; instead of hiding them inside the body, using the “grotesque body” in performance to bring pain to the forefront allows it to disseminate out from the individual body where it becomes part of a social experience and memory.

Ono’s fusing of the private and public, mind and body, materiality and concept are further manifest in her series of seven instructions called *Card Piece*. In this series, Ono uses the German term *Weltinnenraum*, roughly translated to mean “inner world,” to call attention to the interior world of knowledge within each person:

CARD PIECE I

Walk to the center of you *Weltinnenraum*
Leave a card.

CARD PIECE II

Cut a hole in the center of your
Weltinnenraum.
Exchange.

CARD PIECE III

Shuffle your *Weltinnenraums*.
Hand one to a person on the street.

⁶⁶ Stiles, “Unbosoming Lennon”, 32.

Ask him to forget about it.

CARD PIECE IV

Place a stone on each one of the
Weltinnenraums in the world.
Number them.⁶⁷

Stiles describes this space as “self-contained consciousness” made up of “aspects of the self knowable through language” and is “the boundary of mind between that which can and cannot be accessed through logos, but nevertheless pervades the body at the level of cellular knowledge.”⁶⁸ Stiles points out that language cannot fully access this interior space because, as previously discussed, language is too logical and abstract and this space itself not completely known to the possessor. The motif of the *Weltinnenraum* further illustrates Ono's commitment to creating seemingly irrational rules as a means for recovering truths and for experiencing a more authentic reality. Many of her works are playful and *Card Piece* is set up very much like a game in which she constructs imaginative scenarios with simple language in order to penetrate the *Weltinnenraum*. She directs participants to frankly engage their interior selves through a “walk to the center of [their] Weltinnenraum[s]” and “leave a card” there as marker of its presence and perhaps a reminder or where it is found.

Further engagement with themes of violence, social interaction, and healing provoke participants to deeply encounter the *Weltinnenraum*. The next steps in this game require participants to cut and swap *Weltinnenraums* with others, mark every one of them in the world (probably again by leaving a card or other marker to denote their locations), bet their lives on them in a game of rummy, and open them up to the outside elements. Ono acknowledges that sharing one's intimate experiences with others can be painful and risky because participants must cut out a piece of themselves and then give it to a stranger. This mingling of inner knowledge, however, is part of the greater healing process and in effect, raises awareness even if the receiver forgets about it. Stiles explains that forgetting about the received interior piece signifies that it has become part of that person's

⁶⁷ The remainder of the *Card Piece* text is as follows: “Card Piece V: Play rummy with the Weltinnenraums. Play for money. Play solitaire with your Weltinnenraums. Play for death; Card Piece VI: Find a card in your Weltinnenraum; Card Piece VII: Open a window of one of the houses in your Weltinnenraum. Let the wind come in. 1964 spring.”

⁶⁸ Stiles, “Being Undyed”, 145

Weltinnenraum, as that space is not objectively knowable.⁶⁹ It follows that in the sixth instruction, participants must suddenly “find a card” in their *Weltinnenraums*, as there is a continuous process of discovery: the frequency and qualities of merging *Weltinnenraum* pieces is indiscernible. Though Ono strives to facilitate authentic encounters with inner spaces, such encounters themselves are not rational by society’s standards. Therefore she cannot use rational language or forms like traditional narratives to illustrate interpersonal discovery and intrapersonal connections. Locating knowledge deep within the body contradicts conventional Western conceptions of intelligence and learning that rely on a rational mind. As the sole locus of intelligence, the mind is supposed to accumulate information and logically analyze it according to strategies learned in school. Ono criticizes this system of knowledge in her essay “The Word of a Fabricator” (1962), as she points out that this system is simply made up and can therefore be resisted and changed. For Banes, artists in all fields of the avant-garde used the body for means of expression because they understood the very fabric of bodies as containing knowledge:

[The 1960s avant-garde] relied on the wisdom of the body—on the heat of kinetic intuition in the moment—in contrast to predetermined, rational [The 1960s avant-garde] relied on the wisdom of the body—on the heat of kinetic intuition in the moment—in contrast to predetermined, rational.⁷⁰

Banes emphasizes that the body is simultaneously a point of information, expression, and defiance for the 1960s avant-garde. These artists created works in which people moved their bodies and used their imaginations, employed spontaneity, and felt the “heat” or passion that is inevitably part of interacting and intimate bodies. In Ono’s *Card Piece*, participants must use intuition and imagination to find and interact with *Weltinnenraums* and then carry out actions with this technically unknowable space. These instructions, like most of Ono’s works, could completely remain in someone’s mind as they could simply visualize the actions. Or, people could symbolically and creatively act out each instruction. Both methods—imaginary or physical performance—suggest ritual, spontaneity, and require the interaction between bodies and minds.

Ono’s insistence upon making up her own rules to follow in life and art practice closely relate to the Gutai group’s manifesto. They too insist upon forming their own styles and methods of art and define themselves against formal aesthetics of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁷⁰ Banes, 211.

the past, desiring to draw out authentic knowledge from materials themselves. According to the manifesto, the artists believe that in the past, the materials used to make art-objects were “loaded with false significance by human hand and by way of fraud” and they charge artists with hiding under “the cloak of an intellectual aim” in order to present materials that “take on the appearance of something else.”⁷¹ Academies of art create and regulate the art world with rules that seem arbitrary to artists like Ono and those in Gutai. Paralleling the way Ono follows her own made-up rules via performances and instructions, Gutai also insists upon their aesthetic aims and methods to combat society's intrusive and limiting regulations. They claim that “Gutai art does not change the material but brings it to life. Gutai art does not falsify the material” but rather “leaves the material as it is, presenting it just as material, [and] then it starts to tell us something and speaks with a might voice.”⁷² Instead of making materials out to be representations of other things as indicated above, Gutai artists directly invoke the spirit of the material by emphasizing its essential qualities in performances and actions. The focus on achieving authenticity, which is difficult in daily life, is important for both Gutai and Ono.

Smoke Piece is another example of the exchange between body and mind, concept and action. This work is more destructive than *Card Piece*, as essentially everything, including the body, should be smoked. Smoking everything—not just burning it all—also suggests a sense of pleasure in this destruction, that there is satisfaction in physically taking in objects and people. The implication of drug use in *Smoke Piece* also fits with the burgeoning culture surrounding the abundance of psychedelic drugs at this time, as drugs like LSD were viewed as means to reach a more spiritual plane of knowledge and as an escape from reality. However peculiar Ono's work seems, the message probably has less to do with the motif of drug use and more so with a transition of knowledge source from the rational mind to the body. Perhaps whatever a person smokes melds with her *Weltinnenraum* and therefore becomes a part of her body knowledge. There it settles in the unconscious, only to be known and expressed through more performances.

The avant-garde's introduction of a new, unguarded, and “effervescent body” in the 1960s was not without problematic aspects. For example, another development of the new body was an exceptional openness to sexuality, but this sexuality did not have equal implications for women and men. The longstanding

⁷¹ Yoshihara, *The Gutai manifesto*, 1956.

⁷² *Ibid.*

discrepancy between genders of authors, subjects, and representations of women was not suddenly remedied by the development of the “effervescent body,” but was in fact further complicated. Banes points out that during the 1960s, there was no feminist analysis in place to critically examine art history and avant-garde artists presented the female body in different ways: from elaborated versions “of the idealized female nude, to complexly ironic explorations of the classic figure, to the rejection of the female figure as the passive subject of the artist’s gaze altogether.”⁷³ Not only was this avant-garde sexuality often a potentially dubious rehashing of normative gender roles, but only certain sectors of society (namely the avant-garde art circles and members or proponents of youth culture) were deeply engaged in this new rhetoric surrounding the body. Moreover, the growing presence of women in art circles signified that women’s roles were changing, that they were increasingly becoming authors of art, rather than just its subject. Despite the increasing authorship of women and the increasing openness to sexuality in avant-garde circles, Ono often experienced the restrictions and difficulties women artists encountered in Japan and the U.S., demonstrating how inequity and discrimination were still overt and tangible.

Ono’s body in particular was a source of difficulties because she was a woman of color. Though artists like Cage helped foster sincere interest in teachings of Buddhism and other Eastern systems of knowledge, Ono was still pressured by societal conventions in the U.S. regarding her gender and her race. Stiles describes the intersecting oppressions of racism and sexism as “Ono’s double-articulated cultural space—the space of Woman and ethnic Other.” Ono was also publicly viewed as the “other woman, the adulteress who wrecked [John] Lennon’s marriage[s]” to his wife Cynthia and to the Beatles.⁷⁴ The media and public generally criticized Ono for her assertive and unconventional personality. Ono’s artwork challenged what was expected social behavior for women, particularly women of color. Stiles writes that the public framed Ono’s relationship with Lennon as an assault responsible for the Beatles’ break-up and believed that she changed him from the heroic mop-top to a strange hippie. But in reality, their relationship was loving and stimulating, which caused a change in Lennon’s attitudes and behaviors. Ono remarked that she had to show Lennon how he was ingrained in an oppressive society that rewarded his body politic; she blamed society for blinding him to women’s experiences and explained that after he observed how “society [attacked her],” he began to engage more closely with

⁷³ Banes, 224.

⁷⁴ Stiles, “Unbosoming Lennon”, 23.

feminist politics.⁷⁵ Though the public generally derided Lennon's relationship with Ono, Stiles emphasizes that their intimacy provided a space where different bodies unequally positioned within society could connect with and absorb each other's experiences and feelings in an equitable way. Their appearances nude, such as on their album cover for *Two Virgins*, as well as their bed-ins further promote this mutual "surrendering" to each other through a revealing of sexualized but equitable encounters with naked bodies.⁷⁶

Stiles maintains that much of Ono's work before the 1970s has proto-feminist qualities. In many of Ono's pieces that relate to or explicitly include destruction, she challenges issues of identity politics, racism, and sexism. Stiles explains that most of destruction art made by women starting at this time indeed "explores the problem of the obliteration of identity and the decentering of the self;" though women artists often incorporated destructive acts in their art, they more often than men investigate the violence of oppression and present their results in less explicitly violent ways.⁷⁷ Women's interest in producing art that often includes more subtle expressions of destruction and violence reflects experiences of oppression that are institutionalized or are socially normative.

Ono's performance *Cut Piece* combines explorations of the space between concept and material with what appears to be a feminist presentation of her concept of the "stone." The stone relates to the concept of *Weltinnenraum* but refers to a person's inner space as a whole. She first performed *Cut Piece* in Japan and her actions were basically the same in each performance, though it could be performed by men or women and was later performed by other Fluxus artists such as Charlotte Moorman and Jon Hendricks.⁷⁸ The performer sits down on stage, places a pair of scissors next to him or her, and remains still while audience members cut off pieces of clothing and take them away. Regarding this performance, Ono remarks that, "People went on cutting the parts they do not like of me [and] finally there was only the stone that remained of me that was in me but they...[still] wanted to know what it's like in the stone."⁷⁹ Through the action of having her clothes cut off, Ono aesthetically represents the unveiling of her true essence of being, a place not accessible by language or the creation of a tangible object but through a tearing away of outside layers symbolized by her nicest clothes. Lennon and Ono later revealed their nude bodies; here, Ono

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Stiles, "Survival Ethos and Destruction Art", 88.

⁷⁸ Stiles, "Being Undyed", 158.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

essentially allows herself to be stripped of society's coverings and shares her most intimate self with the audience—not just her skin, but what lies deep beneath it. Ono and Lennon emphasized how appearing nude together is freeing and uniting when they said that it shows how “we are all naked underneath and we are all one” and that the body is “nothing to be ashamed of, be free.”⁸⁰ Not only does the concept of the “effervescent” body call attention to the knowledge deep within it, but also the power it has when it is bared to the world.

Though Ono herself emphasized the concept of the stone and inner space and knowledge in *Cut Piece*, the performance is generally regarded today as an early feminist work. Her use of the stone and *Weltinnenraum* to symbolize knowledge located deep within the body—and especially in bodies pushed to the margins of society—relate to the development during the second wave of feminism of the concept of “writing the body” pioneered by French feminist theorists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. They situate the body as a source of information, creation, and expression in order to contest the privileging of the mind over the body and in an effort to include women's creations and bodies in the production of knowledge. Along these lines of feminist theory, *Cut Piece* can be further understood to reveal how feminists would unpack and analyze societal influence in order to get at more authentic information about women and their experiences. Previously to *Cut Piece*, Ono employed the theme of sharing intimate self-knowledge (the *Weltinnenraum*) in *Stone Piece*. She instructs participants to find stones, break them into a powder, and then either throw it into a river or send it to friends. She also stresses that they are never to explain to anyone what they did. Here she reiterates how it is impossible to rationally describe or portray a person's essence or inner space, but nonetheless she or he should find ways to share it with others. Similar to the instructions for *Card Piece* in which performers share and play cards with their *Weltinnenraums*, *Stone Piece* requires sharing of intimate inner knowledge that is reached through a destructive act: they symbolically give away a part of themselves by breaking a stone and grinding it into powder, its essence.

For Ono, the act of giving necessitates an uncovering of the self and this is sometimes painful. In *Cut Piece* for example, the act of cutting is intrusive and even violent and seems especially so in the case of cutting off someone's clothes. This invasive and intimate action implies that finding the inner area of the stone could be painful as it requires removing protective outer layers to reveal the true

⁸⁰ Jann S. Wenner. “The Ballad of John and Yoko,” in *Yes Yoko Ono*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Japan Society, 2000), p. 60.

inner turmoil of one's being. Stiles also connects this performance with themes of the objectification of women as well as revealing the "lesions society leaves on the human body."⁸¹ A person is inevitably shaped by contact with other people and culture and Ono's comments regarding *Cut Piece* emphasize that women in particular are objects scrutinized, formed, and controlled by sexualized violence. Even the 1960s avant-garde in many ways continued to exploit and limit women's bodies as objects of art. Ono's willingness to let others expose her body through a violent action draws attention to the sexism inherent in this process, but also emphasizes the power of deeply sharing oneself with others and with guards down, or "surrendering" as Ono and Lennon described it.

Another piece that explicitly confronts how women are treated as sexualized objects is Ono's *Striptease for Three* that she first performed at a three-day long concert in Kyoto, *Evening till Dawn*, in 1964. This piece has two options: either a curtain rises to reveal three empty chairs on stage and lasts five minutes, or the performer sets three chairs on stage and removes them after thirty minutes. The title raises expectations for a performance in some way resembling an actual strip show, but instead Ono leaves the audience to confront their expectations of seeing performers—most likely women—take off their clothes. One recalls how one audience member, a High Monk who seemed dissatisfied, asked her why she called this performance a striptease if there were no performers or music. Ono explains that her show was about the "stripping of the mind" and that "if it is a chair or stone or women [on stage], it is the same thing."⁸² No matter what was on stage, the audience would still have expectations for the performance to somehow involve women stripping. Ono asks the audience to strip their minds and investigate the reasons why this is the main association made. Like in *Cut Piece*, *Striptease for Three* also implies that one must take off layers of knowledge informed by society in order to reach a deeper self-understanding. This time, the violence is not as blatant as in *Cut Piece*, but is inherent in the sexist structuring of women.

⁸¹ Stiles "Survival Ethos and Destruction Art", 88.

⁸² Ono, "Imagine Yoko", 107.



Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*. Performance, Carnegie Recital Hall, 1965. Photo by Minoru Niizuma. Lenono Photo Archive. Source: Japan Society.

Ono further investigates the topic of violence against women in her film *Rape* (1969), in which she collaborates with Lennon. For seventy-seven minutes, the camera relentlessly follows a young woman through town, down an alley, and eventually to her own home. The film powerfully depicts a constant chase and intrusion, a violation of privacy as the woman becomes increasingly upset and paranoid. Though rape is not depicted literally, the implication of social control over women's lives is evident in the intensity of the chase and the visible fear of the woman. In her anthology of instructions *Grapefruit*, Ono addresses her film,

stating that, "Violence is a sad wind that, if channeled carefully, could bring seeds, chairs, and all things pleasant to us."⁸³ By the end of the film, the violence in *Rape* practically destroys the woman's ability to function. Ono suggests that violence is something to use with caution, but is usually employed with little regard for the broader consequences. Similarly to *Cut Piece*, this film depicts an invasion of space and liberty, but instead of revealing and sharing an inner space in the end, Ono brutally portrays how violence against women damages their lives.

In Ono's installation *Half-A-Room*, she destroys notions of domesticity as well as household items and furniture. The domestic setting has long been portrayed as women's natural environment and place in society and it is where issues of sexuality, economics, and labor converge. Along with Banes' description of the new "effervescent body" and sexuality comes a reconfiguring of domestic life and roles. Ono's room contains white furniture and other objects all cut in half and arranged like an austere showroom display. Munroe describes Ono's early objects, including *Half-A-Room* as "radically reductive" in order to "[juxtapose] an idea against a visual situation to provoke a kind of telepathic poetry of irrational truths... where material stands for content."⁸⁴ Ono presents these everyday items stripped of their normal function: a person can no longer sit in the chair, wear the hat, or use the cabinet and the room seems empty, even sad. Perhaps the traditional set-up of domestic life for women should no longer be automatically viewed as functional or natural.

By halving the items, Ono reveals the "psychic and physical" bisection of everything and nothing that is "a condition of human existence."⁸⁵ This relates back to her concern with the spaces between concepts and materiality, the body and thought and inner knowledge. Though these items are physically incomplete, viewers inevitably will imagine the rest of them, rendering them whole in their minds. By arranging the items in a domestic setting, she further emphasizes the application of the dichotomy of existence/absence in real life. Women are supposed to be fulfilled by domestic life, but this work suggests that home life alone is not enough to make someone complete. Just as her superficial layers were symbolically stripped off by way of others cutting off her clothes in *Cut Piece*, thus exposing her deep core of being, Ono searches for true aspects of human life in this environment. The halving of these household items suggests a

⁸³ Ono, *Grapefruit*.

⁸⁴ Munroe, 30.

⁸⁵ Joan Rothfuss, "Somewhere for the Dust to Cling: Yoko Ono's Paintings and Early Objects," in *Yes Yoko Ono*, eds. Alexandra Munroe, Yoko Ono, Jon Hendricks, and Bruce Altshuler (New York: Japan Society, 2000), 126.



Yoko Ono, *Half-A-Room*, 1967. Altered readymades. Photo by Oded Lobl. Source: Japan Society.

means to escape the limitations of domesticity, for as her body of work makes apparent, creation of new ways of living, thinking, and interacting result from performances and understandings of destruction.

Yoko Ono's destruction art is imaginative, confrontational, and groundbreaking. She asks participants to creatively envision realities where people can smoke bodies and die multiple times. And during postwar life that was dominated by another war and tense social conflict, Ono's conceptual work provided positive affirmations of life and techniques for envisioning reality in new ways. Ono's work does indeed fit with Stiles explanation of destruction art as an ethical endeavor, but rather than only representing violence with violent actions, she turns it into a point of thoughtful inquiry and discussion, contrasting subtle destructive undertones with outrageously destructive instructions (such as smoking your own pubic hair or painting with your blood). As she tackles issues of sexism, victimization, and war, she does not lose her sense of humor and creates works that are often light-hearted, comical, and even sweet—all the more emphasizing her unique viewpoint within contemporary art.

Her conceptual work is innovative because through simple instructions that may seem strange or trivial on the surface, she penetrates deeply personal and powerful spaces within individuals as well as the social body. Each person who encounters her art could have countless reactions and interpretations, which is in part why it continues to be influential. The instructions, paintings, objects, and

performances are open-ended, personal, and though I have discussed how much they are born out of specific cultures and histories, people do not necessarily have to engage with those specifics in order to engage with the artwork. Ono frequently challenges assumptions about the body, what lies beneath it, and how it is positioned in this world, but the process of understanding these questions will not simply be finished once someone comes up with a new theory. Ono and her artwork break through bounds of time and place, for creativity, personal and cultural investigation, and destruction are elements of life immemorial.

Whitney Frank is a 5th-year senior majoring in Art History and Women Studies. In her work, she concentrates on avant-garde art and politics of the early and mid-20th century, researching connections between creative expression and analysis of identity formation.