

Yoko Ono Turns Eighty  
by  
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Yoko Ono turned eighty February 18, 2013. But by all accounts she's not aging. How is that possible? Wait. Maybe that's the point. Aging is supposed to be the last frontier. So it makes sense she'd challenge any preconceptions about it, doesn't it?

I first became aware of Yoko in the late 1960s, through *Grapefruit*, her whimsical book of instruction poems that invite us to tap into our own creativity. Here's one: "Cloud Piece: Imagine the clouds dripping/Dig a hole in your garden to put them in." Here's another: "Map Piece: Draw a map to get lost." She puts ideas out there and we do what we want with them-- paint, draw, perform, think, laugh, dream or imagine.

The poem-like verbal instructions encourage what she calls "an exploration of the invisible." *Grapefruit* is now revered as a pivotal work in conceptual art, helping to establish that art is about ideas, not objects. Yoko doesn't consider her work finished, until we complete it. She once likened her work to throwing a stone in the water and watching a ripple effect.

I found that ripple effect comforting when I first read those instructions, because as an artist working alone, they made me feel more connected. And that core of connectedness still runs through her work: that anyone can be an artist, that we're all here together now, that imagination has the power to transform and heal, and that we should give peace a chance.

In 2001 I saw Yoko's retrospective, "Yes Yoko Ono" at the Japan Society in New York and wrote a feature story about it for *Art New England*. Shortly after, I interviewed her for *Ruminator Review*, and linked up with Nell Beram to start a journey that would become *Yoko Ono: Collector of Skies*, released by Abrams Books in 2013

We wanted to introduce Yoko's work to a younger audience, but we think all ages will relate to the book, not just because Yoko is one of the most courageous pioneering artists on the planet, but because she's always been an outsider. Whether she was traveling between Japan and the United States (and not feeling at home anywhere) or being criticized by the media for her romantic and artistic relationship with John Lennon, or trying to fit in as a

wife and mother, or daring to make art and music that couldn't be categorized, she always found a way to stay true to herself.

Coming out of the avant-garde world, where art making is often considered obscure, Yoko's work is surprisingly accessible, like the instruction poems, or when she puts an apple on a pedestal in a gallery, prodding us to ask if it's "art." Or when she presents art as a game, like in "Play it by Trust," painted completely white. There is no "enemy" to fight or defeat, since all the pieces look the same.

And what about the iconic pre-feminist work, "Cut Piece?" We want readers to know how Yoko, as a young woman, sat on stage in 1964 (before "performance art" was even a term) and shockingly asked audience members to come up and cut off her clothes with scissors. They did. And she was left practically naked. Why did she do it? One reason might be to present the audience with a moral dilemma. Were they going to sit there passively and watch it happen or do what she asked? As a testament to the fluidity of this work, artists around the world have performed it, and changed the context, including Charlotte Moorman in a nunnery. At the age of seventy, Yoko performed it again too, and dedicated it to world peace.

Yoko's art continues to be reinterpreted by others-changing and reinventing itself just the way she does. Who expected her to become a chart-topping dance club diva? Yet edgy artists like Pet Shop Boys, Basement Jaxx and Felix Da Housecat have stunningly created dance remixes of her work for the albums *Open Your Box* and *Yes I'm a Witch*.

Isn't it great? As a visual artist, musician, filmmaker, poet, performance artist, feminist, peace activist, humanitarian, and environmentalist (and who knows what's next?) Yoko continues to beautifully blow our minds. I hope readers of *Yoko Ono: Collector of Skies*, are as fascinated as we are by her life story and that her belief in the power of imagination and - against all odds-in the word "yes," are an inspiration. Happy birthday Yoko! Here's to another eighty years-at least.

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