



**FIGURE 1**

**Entrance of *Growing Freedom: The Instructions of Yoko Ono / The art of John and Yoko.***  
Source: photo by author.

# *Growing Freedom: The Instructions of Yoko Ono / The Art of John and Yoko*

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**Y**oko Ono, one of the most important names of our time, engages the viewer at the Vancouver Art Gallery with selected works of her 60-year art career. Yoko Ono is a Japanese conceptual and performance artist well-known for her creative collaborations with her long-term partner, John Lennon. If I were to summarize Ono's solo exhibition *Growing Freedom* in one word, it would be "cathartic." The artworks are a way of healing for Yoko Ono and evoke a release of emotion from the visitor. *Growing Freedom* narrates Yoko Ono's artistic life chronologically through a circular walk within the entire ground floor of the gallery. The exhibition focuses on two main periods and themes relating to them: *The instructions of Yoko Ono* show her early artworks, and *The Art of John and Yoko* exhibit her collaborations with John Lennon. Yoko Ono is not an artist we can easily categorize, such as a sculptor or a painter. Some of her artworks are instructions written on the wall;<sup>1</sup> some are short clips;<sup>2</sup> and some are political protests.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> First published in 1964, *Grapefruit* is a book written by Yoko Ono. It consists of short evocative, instructions that encourage readers to engage in different acts of imagination and interaction with the world around them. *Grapefruit* is considered a pioneering work of conceptual art that challenges traditional notions of art by inviting viewers to participate in the creative process, much like many of Ono's other works.

<sup>2</sup> *Freedom*, directed by Yoko Ono (Yoko Ono and John Lennon, 1970), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7-cgx5ke8w>.

<sup>3</sup> Yoko Ono and John Lennon, "*Bed-ins for Peace* starring John Lennon & Yoko Ono (1969)," directed by Yoko & John and filmed by Nic Knowland, June 22, 2012, Video record of the performance art, 1:10:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRjjiOV003Q>.



**FIGURE 2**

***Painting to Hammer a Nail*, wooden block painted white, nails and hammer, 30.5 x 44.5 x 6 cm. Replica of the original artwork exhibited in Indica Gallery, 1966/2021.**

**London.**

Source: photo by author.

As we enter the exhibition, the first thing we hear is the noise of a hammer hitting a nail, emanating from her participatory and instructional painting, *Painting to Hammer a Nail* (1961). This loud sound is associated with a construction scene rather than a setting, which is traditionally quiet. Visitors are expected to create the artwork collectively by hammering nails onto a canvas. This process disrupts the silent nature of the gallery and puts the viewer in the artist's place, pointing to the influence of the Fluxus movement in her artwork.<sup>4</sup>

In order to understand why the works specifically evoke the feeling of freedom for Yoko Ono, we need to look into her past. Born into an upper-class family in Japan, she was one of the first in her family to attend a co-ed elementary school.<sup>5</sup> Her primary school education was diverse, encompassing traditional and experimental approaches. The children were taught to enjoy the moment and listen to the sounds of the earth, which was in line with Buddhist practices in Japan.<sup>6</sup> The effects of this education and Buddhist elements can be seen clearly in her earliest conceptual word-based works, such as *Lighting Piece: Light a match and watch till it goes out* (1955), which pushes the visitor to visualize the notion of time and emphasizes the fluidity of ideas.

One of the other pieces that demonstrate the fluidity of ideas is *Play It by Trust* (1966/2020). This artwork consists of a chessboard that is made entirely of white pieces. The board represents the futility of looking at warfare as a binary

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<sup>4</sup> Midori Yoshimoto, "Introduction: Women & Fluxus: Toward a Feminist Archive of Fluxus," *Women & Performance* 19, no. 3 (2009): 287. Fluxus was an avant-garde movement popular in the 1960's and 1970's that put emphasis on the artistic process rather than the "completed" work.

<sup>5</sup> Phi, "The Aura – Gunnar B. Kvaran: Yoko Ono and Growing Freedom," February 4, 2022, in Spotify, podcast, MP3 audio, [https://open.spotify.com/episode/7Gq9k0z67Rinh8qsBLcFhf?si=LWRfo09cTj2gt1pBzxng3g&utm\\_source=copy-link](https://open.spotify.com/episode/7Gq9k0z67Rinh8qsBLcFhf?si=LWRfo09cTj2gt1pBzxng3g&utm_source=copy-link).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

process of winners and losers.<sup>7</sup> The unwinnable nature of war is a consistent message throughout the exhibition.

The emphasis on war and its unavoidable harm furthers the importance of recovery and healing. One of the many interactive artworks in the exhibition is *Mend Piece*, which was inspired by the Japanese tradition called “Kintsugi.” This traditional art form helps people see the beauty within their souls by mending broken pieces of pottery together and creating a new object, perhaps one with increased value, as the audience has now invested their time and effort into it, showing the journey the object has been through. The curatorial decision to leave out the year of the artwork in *Mend Piece* highlights the continuous re-creation taking place in Ono’s pieces.

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<sup>7</sup> Unknown, “Yoko Ono: Play it by Trust,” Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2011, <https://camstl.org/exhibitions/yoko-ono-play-it-by-trust>.



**FIGURE 3**

***Mend Piece*, ceramics, string, glue, twine, shelves, table, chairs. Replica of the original artwork exhibited in Indica Gallery, 1966/2021. London.**

Source: photo by author.

Even though her education was considered modern for its time, gender norms surrounding Japanese women were prescribed. Her frustrations with the societal constraints that women face are expressed in her performance *Cut Piece* (1965), a video record, which is included in the exhibition. In the video, she sits still on a stage, dressed impeccably, while the audience cuts pieces of her clothing. As Ono explains, her performance represents “A form of total giving as opposed to reasonable giving.”<sup>8</sup> Even though the concepts she brings to the table with her artwork may seem dark, there is a playful optimism in them. Her work *Ceiling Painting/Yes Painting* (1966), on display in the middle of *The Instructions of Yoko Ono*, explains this idea more clearly.

Her instructional and interactive work, *Ceiling Painting/Yes Painting*, consists of a ladder; a magnifying glass, hanging from the ceiling, is meant to be used by the visitor once on top of the ladder. Looking through the glass, one sees the word “yes” written on the ceiling. Essentially Ono is telling us we need to look for the answers we seek. According to Ono, *Ceiling Painting/Yes Painting* can be seen as a metaphor for wandering towards hope, which further demonstrates the cathartic nature of her artworks.<sup>9</sup> Yoko Ono and John Lennon met in front of this piece; thus, this artwork also functions as a gateway to the next thematic area: *The Art of John and Yoko*.

The most extensive thematic area is called *The Art of John and Yoko*, which includes their collaborative artworks and their documentation between the years 1967 and 2021. Curators have chosen to exhibit every artwork after Ono started collaborating with Lennon into this section, even the pieces Ono produced after Lennon’s death in 1980. The central part of this section is devoted to the *Bed-ins*

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<sup>8</sup> MoMA Learning Team, “Cut Piece,” *The Body in Art, ca. 2006*, [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/yoko-ono-cut-piece-1964](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/yoko-ono-cut-piece-1964).

<sup>9</sup> The Art Story, “Yoko Ono,” *Artists*, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/ono-yoko>.

*for Peace*, a two-week-long performance art piece that the couple created on their honeymoon in 1969. It was staged first in Amsterdam and later in Montréal. The idea behind this work stemmed from the sit-in protests of the time, where protesters did not move until their demands were met or they were taken into custody. Using the media influence from their public image, the couple invited journalists to their hotel room and protested in a non-violent way. Since *Bed-ins for Peace* is a performance piece that took place in the past, different objects, such as videos of their performance, photographs, and the banners they used during the protest, represent it in the exhibition.



**FIGURE 4**

***Bed-ins for Peace*, performance art. Hilton Hotel, Amsterdam, and Hotel Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth, Montreal. March 25-31, 1969 and May 26-June 1, 1969. Photographs and Posters, 1969/2021.**

Source: photo by author.

The continuation of an anti-war theme is brought to the viewer's attention with *Play It by Trust*, the artwork with a chessboard from the previous section. It continues with *Bed-ins for Peace* creating a flow within the exhibited pieces. However, *Bed-ins for Peace* is located at the center of the exhibition, and because of its size, it takes up most of the exhibition, being equidistant from the entrance and exit. *Bed-ins for Peace* is also the work most mentioned in the exhibition, likely because it represents Yoko Ono and John Lennon's stance on political and social issues. Although it helps to amplify the peace message, it also associates the whole exhibition with John Lennon, as this work takes up a lot of space in the exhibition. By implication, the message misleads the visitor, in that it diverts the viewer from focusing primarily on Ono's art works.

Even though Ono's feminist perspective is prominent in her artworks, a large part of the exhibition is devoted to videos and archives of performance pieces that John and Ono made together perhaps to attract audiences who are John Lennon fans. A constant, almost obsessive emphasis on John Lennon is felt throughout much of the exhibition. Moreover, the documentation about their collaborative works has become so detailed that the exhibition includes the receipt of a meal they ordered to their room during the *Bed-ins for Peace* performance. Even though Lennon was a big part of Ono's life, making her collaborations with the musician cover more than half of the exhibition is problematic when considering the exhibition's purpose is to define her. If this is meant to be a solo exhibition for Ono, it doesn't adequately reflect that idea. There is already a stigma around Ono. Even though she is one of the most influential contemporary artists, when asked if people address her first as an artist, she responded, "I think they first address me as the wife of John, the widow, and the person who broke up



**FIGURE 5**

***Bed-ins for Peace memorabilia, filing cabinet with letters, messages, memoirs, and biographies of the people who have influenced and contributed to *Bed-ins for Peace* in Montreal. Replica of the cabinet in room 1742 in Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Montreal, 1969/2021.***

Source: photo by author.

the Beatles.”<sup>10</sup> This is not mentioned in the exhibition at all. Unfortunately, this notion is perpetuated within the themes of *Growing Freedom*.

Despite these criticisms, the success of this exhibition in presenting Ono’s visionary philosophy of life and artistic ideology to the audience is undeniable. What is fascinating about this exhibition is that works made 50 years ago are relevant to us and still reflect today’s world. To exemplify Yoko Ono’s relevance to the present, on February 26, 2022, the day I visited the exhibition, there was a protest in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery over the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. It is almost absurd how little things have changed. Throughout the exhibition, we are faced with many things in our daily lives that we do not want to face or are afraid to face, such as war, loss, sexual harassment, or situations where we are silenced. However, the exhibition concludes by having visitors tie their wishes on the *Wishing Trees*, thereby giving us hope. In fact, when we complete our circle in the exhibition, we finish with the hope of entering a new circle that will be better for us. This notion reinforces Ono’s works being unfinished as they continue to be worked on by the viewer. As Yoko Ono said: “instead of trying to hold on to what was impossible to hold on to, I wanted to make ‘change’ into a positive move: let the work grow by asking people to participate and add their efforts.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Elvis Mitchell, “Yoko Ono,” *Interview Magazine*, November 2013, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/yoko-ono-1>.

<sup>11</sup> Yoko Ono, “*Mix a building and the wind, New York, November 2001*,” interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist, in *Yoko Ono – Hans Ulrich Obrist: The Conversation Series*, (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2009), 11.