FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

Writing is an inherently participatory, communal act, as a scholar can only form a meaningful argument in dialogue with other artists and authors. Students in WR 100, "When Cultures Collide: Global Perspectives in Contemporary Art," directly addressed this issue of participation in their third paper assignment, which asked them to contextualize an international visual artist's work against relevant theories of interactive art. Yoko Ono, an artist renowned for her individuality, nuance, and grace, seemed a natural choice for Eva Gallagher, who exhibits these same qualities in her sophisticated prose.

Eva's essay is notable for its dexterous treatment of multiple types of sources. A historical performance such as Ono's *Cut Piece* must be contemplated through its documentation: videos, photographs, and an "event score" or script that dictates the action. Eva met this challenge by translating her visual source materials into lush descriptions, which in turn, she interpreted using the theoretical texts assigned for class. She further expanded the discussion to include carefully selected sources from her own research. Perhaps Eva's nuanced approach to these visual and textual materials stems from her concurrent work in graphic design: her composition *Puddle Illusions* adorns the cover of this issue of *WR*. Ultimately, Eva's conclusion links Ono's proto-feminist examination of gender to contemporary feminist efforts, such as the "free the nipple" campaign on social media. In so doing, Eva reveals how Ono's piece transcends its original 1960s iteration to illuminate urgent contemporary concerns, both within and beyond academia and the art world.

Sarah Parrish
WR 100: When Cultures Collide: Global Perspectives in Contemporary Art

From the Writer

With women's rights being fought for more than ever in human history, feminism is no longer a radical stance; it is a global movement, a mentality that Yoko Ono has embodied from the very start. She has made what was once a foreign concept a meaningful and accessible way of perceiving the world by granting her viewers a chance to be participants in her artistic process. As I delved deeper into my research, I was increasingly intrigued by the objectifying quality in Ono's work and felt it was imperative that I determine the underlying relationship between the female body and the vulnerability that seems to accompany its exposure.

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EVA VIDAN GALLAGHER

PASSIVE OBJECTIFICATION: VULNERABILITY IN YOKO ONO'S PARTICIPATORY ART

Contemporary art, regardless of its medium or creator, is united by a seemingly evident objective: to engage its viewer. To capture the slightest of attention spans and achieve a thought-provoking status is central to the creative process; however, it may be even more so in participatory art. Known for its interactive nature, participatory art relies entirely on its audience to execute a particular set of instructions, such as an *event score,* as coined by the international art movement *Fluxus*. In completing these directions, the audience actualizes the artist's underlying message, evident in both the viewers' facial and emotional responses, and ultimately retreats with far more than a gallery pamphlet—they are left with an experience. Despite a passive role in many of her unconventional participatory works, Yoko Ono draws her viewers into an entirely immersive experience, granting them the permission to engage on a tangible level. Through the dualism of Ono's passive objectification and the active physical engagement required of the audience, Ono challenges what art historian Sarat Maharaj refers to as the "impossibility of translation" (Maharaj 29). In so doing, Ono reaffirms that the sensations of discomfort and intimacy are mutual, shared by both artist and participant (Maharaj 29). By means of live audience interaction, the participatory nature of *Cut Piece* (1964), *Fog Piece* (1964), and *Touch Me III* (2008) reveal the degree to which Ono engages in this passive objectification of both the female body and her physical self, highlighting the loss of agency that accompanies touch and female nudity in the public eye.

While Ono's lasting impact on the viewer is beyond her control, she defies the momentary barriers of translatability as established by Maharaj's "'Perfidious Fidelity:' The Untranslatability of the Other." Convinced the act of translation is virtually impossible, Maharaj labels it inherently "opaque" and never truly "transparent" (Maharaj 29). Though the notion of "hybridity," or combining the "self and other," takes on an essential role in the interactions between Ono and her audience, Maharaj also suggests a distortive tendency is present, seemingly tainting the shared experience (Maharaj 29). However, the sensations of discomfort and intimacy are reciprocated by the artist and the viewer, generating a unifying force that defeats what remains visually and conceptually ambiguous. According to art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson, Ono's former husband Tony Cox suggests "Ono is an artist who does not translate clearly, and that the enigmatic aspects of her work should be seen as a delicate part of a foreign culture" (Bryan-Wilson 119). By attributing the ambiguity present in Ono's participatory art to her Japanese roots, Cox degrades the authenticity of human interaction, imposing the boundaries of countries and cultures on the engagement of the artist and viewer. Ono successfully overcomes the "impossibility of translation" by rendering both herself and the female body vulnerable; the audience members participating, regardless of gender, experience the mutual formation of a "hybrid," and the performance ultimately becomes a "vehicle for demarcating and disseminating difference" (Maharaj 29). Just as the event scores translate from text to performance, Ono's

passivity and the audience members' active engagement also emerge in dualistic synergy. In so doing, Ono and her viewers are not constrained by the translation process; rather the shared sensations of discomfort and intimacy enhance the overall performance, gradually decreasing the stigma that accompanies exposure of the female body.

Perhaps Ono's most influential performance, *Cut Piece*, embodies both the passive objectification of women and the active engagement of the audience to convey the loss of agency in being "stripped, scrutinised, and violated by the audience's gaze" (Bryan-Wilson 103). In this participatory piece, Ono invites her viewers to individually join her on the stage and cut away a piece of her garment with provided scissors. To add to this already vulnerable state, Ono remains entirely silent for the duration of the performance, maintaining an expression of neutrality and poise. These subtleties are only amplified by her seating on the ground, where she rests on her shins in a traditionally polite Japanese position known as *seiza* (Bryan-Wilson 101). While Ono seems to abide by the manners of her homeland, this sitting position, with its modesty and reduction in stature, is a greater mark of vulnerability than cultural conformity.

Curiously, the viewer experience of those seated in Yamaichi Concert Hall, Kyoto, Japan, on July 20, 1964 was rather mixed. With anticipation and wonder in the air, Yoko Ono took the stage to perform *Cut Piece*, a mask of resilience and concentration shielding the vulnerability to come. Looking back on her earliest performance, Ono admits her viewers initially "did not know what to make of it," as the newly emerging concept of performance art was shocking in itself, forcing the viewers to engage in topics otherwise neglected ("Yoko Ono's Cut Piece Still Shocks," *BBC*). Addressing such themes undeniably evokes a range of responses, yet beyond the tangible creases of faces are underlying emotional reactions, igniting passion to perform or even reinvent Ono's work as "few people elicit as visceral a reaction as Yoko Ono…the mere sound of her name…sends people into facial contortions, either of awe and admiration or disgust and dismissal" ("'I Just Let Things Happen,'" *Pop Matters*). The audiences' participation in unison with the exposure of the female body, particularly Yoko Ono's as a public figure, is empowering in a feminist context; however, when removed from this framework, gender does little to protect from the vulnerable state that remains.

Although in her 2003 performance of *Cut Piece* Ono sits on a chair, it is possible that this upgrade is a sign of abandoning her prior innocence and embracing a sort of inner resistance to her self-objectification. Such nuanced defiance is revealed even in her earlier performances, most notably in 1965 when a man removed large portions of Ono's tank top, exposing her undergarments ("Yoko Ono—Cut Piece (1965)", *YouTube*). In a small act of instinctive resistance, Ono slightly lifts her hand in opposition, fighting the urge to pull away and protect her body. In this sense, Martha Schwendener's assertion that *Cut Piece* is "'more like a rape than an art performance'" is entirely justified (Bryan-Wilson 103). Perhaps only visible to the most empathetic of viewers, Ono displays utter distress during those lingering seconds, and it is her gender that heightens this sense of endangerment. The fact that Ono is unable to maintain her composure actually *strengthens* the translatability of the piece; the individuals interacting with her becomes acutely aware of her discomfort, which in turn influences their succeeding steps. An internal conflict arises, most notable in the participants' facial expressions, as they strip her of the lone fabric that shields their body from the world's glare. What is more, Ono claims that in her first performance of *Cut Piece* a man "'took the pair of scissors and made a motion to stab me,'" thereby adding to both the physical and psychological vulnerability of being threatened, particularly by a male (Bryan-Wilson 107). Indeed, as Bryan-Wilson reminds us, in this performance "Ono's body represents all female bodies, and she as female art object represents all

females as objects" (Bryan-Wilson 103). In addition to being more susceptible to gender subordination, aggression, and sexual assault, women who reveal more skin are routinely labeled as overly provocative and bringing these threats upon themselves. This objectification mirrors the violation of women worldwide, and it is ultimately Ono's silent resilience and exposed flesh that empower participants to confront the vulnerability that accompanies the female gender.

Despite its lesser-known status, Ono's *Fog Piece* (1964) manifests an inversion of *Cut Piece*, expanding upon the play between passive and active, in addition to the physical exposure of women. As opposed to disrobing Ono, the interactive piece requires its audience to wrap her in white bandages as a fog machine produces smoke to "obscure her further" (Bryan-Wilson 104). Though this reverses the sense of physical exposure, the vulnerability remains as she is stripped of her agency yet again. Countering Maharaj's claim of untranslatability, the interaction between artist and viewer in *Fog Piece* elicits the same discomfort and intimacy as *Cut Piece*, albeit through opposite means. Perhaps even a sense of wrongdoing accompanies this act, as the audience is covering an entirely passive individual to the point of completely imposed concealment, and by extent, potentially inflicting a feeling of nonexistence upon Ono. While some participants may not be moved to the same degree as others, there is an intrinsic response of guilt in bringing this performance to life, ultimately revealing the power event scores hold and the implied collision between individual and society underlying both pieces. By broadening the dualistic nature of this passive and active artist-audience relationship in *Fog Piece*, Ono successfully addresses the loss of agency of women in the context of concealment.

In relation to *Cut Piece*, *Fog Piece* also addresses the other end of the spectrum when it comes to baring the female body: concealment. Although there are countless women who simply prefer to be covered due to their identity, culture, or religion—all of which should be respected—there are many regions of the world where the covering of women is a mark of oppression. In the context of *Fog Piece*, the participating viewers are representative of societies' insistence on covering the bodies of women, even in entirely absurd scenarios, such as breastfeeding in public. This need for physical control over women is of equal relevance in the metaphorical concealment of women. Silenced and underrepresented, women of the Western world are stripped of agency in the realm of politics, reproductive rights, and the economic discrimination of lower wages and maternity leave. This imposed invisibility forms a paradoxical twist: women are vulnerable to the world both exposed *and* concealed, an indication that reform is paramount. However, in this day and age, it seems the most instantaneous loss of agency occurs when the female body is exposed.

Drawing upon the elements of exposure and vulnerability further, Ono's more recent work *Touch Me III* (2008) renders the female form passive to an even greater extent as Ono removes herself entirely from this installation, only to leave behind wooden frames containing silicone cast female body parts. Displayed on a wooden table next to a stand with a bowl of water and cloth, these body parts feature the mouth, two breasts, belly, pubic area, knees, and feet. Interestingly, no other facial features are included apart from the mouth, signaling a sexual connotation as well as a potential lack of identity or loss of agency. What is more, this further objectifies the female form by quite literally isolating individual body parts and placing them in confining compartments. As for translatability, even without the artist's physical presence, the nature of the installation allows for both a visual and tactile interpretation. While there may be some degree of ambiguity with regards to intent, Ono's artistic choices, such as the use of boxes and individual female parts, communicate the message concerning the exposure of the female body. Since this participatory piece enables viewers to actively interact with the body parts as they please, the resulting implication is women's overall vulnerability when exposed. In bridging

the passive and active roles as in the previously mentioned performances, Ono presents her audience with the power to tower over the table, instilling an authoritative perspective upon this tactile experience. While Ono is not physically present in *Touch Me III*, her absence by no means lessens the quality of engagement or the impact of her message in relation to *Cut Piece* and *Fog Piece*. Even in a sedentary installation such as *Touch Me III*, a relationship still exists between the viewer and the object, and it is the power of this interaction that ultimately conveys the issues of exposure and vulnerability for women.

In urging her audiences to engage with the participatory nature of her performances *Cut Piece* and *Fog Piece*, as well as her installation *Touch Me III*, Ono conquers Maharaj's claim that individual experiences are untranslatable, delivering pieces that evoke both discomfort and intimacy. By juxtaposing the passive objectification of women with the active interaction of her viewers, the vulnerability and loss of agency that accompany the exposed female form become central to Ono's works. These issues are not confined to the art world, however. Given the recent unraveling of the *Free the Nipple* campaign initiated by activist and filmmaker Lina Esco, the general public, as well as some legislators, have begun to address the double standards concerning exposure of the female body. This movement is not only rooted in the grounds of equality; it also pertains to motherhood, and the absurd taboo surrounding feeding a hungry infant in public. The shift in attitude from many women in the Western world has led to organized protests and small acts of resistance among individuals, inspiring a new era of feminism. In an act of tribute to Ono, musician and performance artist Peaches embodied the values of this movement even prior to its formation in 2013 by reenacting *Cut Piece*. Ono praised her for her "sensitivity, vulnerability, strength without trying—all with dignity, representing us women" (Ono, "Yoko Ono on Peaches' Performances"). Looking back on her own experience in performance art, Ono admits, "we, the past feminists, thought it was important to look like soldiers if we wanted to be taken seriously. No more. Women are not scared of showing their vulnerability" (Ono, "Yoko Ono on Peaches' Performances"). Perhaps Ono was born before her time, attempting to translate what truly used to be untranslatable. However maybe that was exactly what the world needed: an artistic mind to start the conversation.

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