

John Jones

Meeting Yoko Ono

Yoko Ono's critics - perhaps less vindictive in the years since Lennon's death - have often blamed her for the break-up of The Beatles, though it appears the group's days were numbered even before John Lennon met her. What is certainly untrue is the notion that she used John to break into the art world: she was in fact well known in avant-garde circles long before. Lennon's celebrity simply brought her a wider, if not wholly appreciative, audience.

In September 1965 I began a year's research in New York which involved recording interviews with American artists. We lived in Greenwich Village. I probably first read about Yoko Ono in the Village newspaper which I searched for artistic events that would give me quick access to the art scene. I remember getting up in the dark to attend a rooftop 'happening' at dawn. I found the house but couldn't bring myself to knock on the door. I imagined the occupants might not take kindly to being woken by a foreigner who wanted to get onto the roof 'for a happening'.

'For a what?

'A happening.'

'Listen buddy - you know what time it is?'

I waited in the street for another art lover to show up who would know the form but no one came and I went back to bed. Later I was told that I could have pushed open the door and a staircase would have taken me all the way to the roof where the sun's first rays caught Yoko seated at a table. On it was laid out a row of similar pebbles which were priced at 5c, 50c, \$5, \$50, \$500, \$5000... They were clearly soliciting the question 'Why are these virtually identical stones priced so differently?' The answer was that buying them would give them their value. A pebble you gave five cents for became a 5c pebble; one you paid five thousand dollars for became a \$5000 Pebble. It was a neat observation about art in the marketplace, a sort of dealers' sequitur to Duchamp's frequent declarations that art is simply what we agreed to call art. But it was recognisably Yoko's. One of her recurring themes at that time was the affirmation that things are only what we think they are, that 'it's all in the mind'.

That year there were many 'happenings'; the word covered a multitude of spectacles which had in common little except the excitement of trying out alternatives to conventional theatrical and musical performances.

Yoko was already a well established exponent of this genre. She gave a concert at Carnegie Hall in 1961, toured Japan with John Cage, and her New York appearances were frequent.

I think the first time I actually saw Yoko was at a programme which included Alan Kaprow spreading the floor with something (newspapers?) and then sweeping them up – a tall stepladder was involved; and Charlotte Moorman who had trouble with the police for public appearances in which it was claimed she wore nothing but the cello she was playing. It was probably one of the occasions when Yoko invited people to come from the audience and, with scissors, to snip off bits of the dress she was wearing. They could cut off as much or as little as they liked. At the time I wasn't sure what this particular piece 'meant'. The inverted commas recognised that 'meaning' was not a necessary feature of happenings. In them was the spirit that informed Susan Sontag's wise essay 'Against interpretation'.

But many of Yoko's inventions had what you might call a 1960s version of a moral. The dress-cutting seemed more enigmatic, but generated considerable dramatic suspense. At first there was a relatively jocular audience reaction which sounded like 'OK. You asked for it' and young men pretended eagerness to come forward and denude her. But when eventually volunteers had the scissors in their hands and were poised to cut, the oddness of the situation – and perhaps the powerful and inescapable thoughts of public rape – rendered them hardly able to cut at all. As I remember, they made a joke of it, cutting a mere centimetre or two, or, say, a decorative button the private thoughts that were generated in the audience may have ranged from cruel, violent and erotic fantasies to feelings of apprehension about what was to happen, which focused real hostility on the volunteer with the scissors (could they be sure he was sane?). And that was surely the point of it. With a minimum of stimulus the audience found itself experiencing that variety of sympathetic and disturbing emotions that far more complex theatre aspires to awaken.

I can't remember asking to interview Yoko but I did and she talked about how some of her childhood experiences had survived to inform her current inventions. Hiding from visitors in a bag, for instance. She mentioned 'Fluxus' which was a kind of neo-Dada group, not easy to describe, which organised 'Fluxfests' – a performances of happenings – and which published related material and sold 'irrational' art manifestations by mail order. Through them I got a sales list of Yoko's works and bought a loop of tape she prepared on which, it turned out, nothing was recorded. That may be misleading. Reading her list again I see that I may have bought: Soundtape of the Snow Falling at Dawn... 25c per inch. Types: a. Snow of India, b. Snow of Kyo, c. Snow of Aos. Playing it again I can no longer be sure which snow mine is.

From the same list I could have bought custom-made underwear in vicuna to 'accent your special defects'. There was a crying machine 'which drops tears and cries for you when coin is deposited ... \$3000'.

And, for half that price, a Sky Machine which 'produces nothing when a coin is deposited'.

I do have a set of cards on which were printed do-it-yourself happenings, one a day for two weeks. '1st, 2nd and 3rd day: Breathe... 10th day: Swim in your dreams as far as you can. It's almost a Beatles song title. One can understand John Lennon's frequent assertion that when he met Yoko Ono at London's Indica Gallery in 1966 he recognised a kindred spirit, one that matched that maverick, fantasist side of him, already ill at ease under the restraints of Epstein's respectability.

In 1964, Yoko published a book of her works called Grapefruit. She gave me a copy. The title was chosen because she understood that a grapefruit was a hybrid of a lemon and an orange, the consequence of a collaboration between man and nature. Her inventions likewise aspired to combine the natural and the man-made. She quoted the skyline as another metaphor or example of the coming together of nature and human contrivance. Opening the book at random I read 'Map piece: Draw a map to get lost'.

One of Yoko's injunctions was to give someone a present that you would like to receive yourself, so when she invited us to dinner I presented her with a book I found in the Village. It was old and well bound but wordless, its pages having been neatly pierced in delightful patterns of holes. It wasn't Braille and I never guessed its purpose or point. I thought it was a wonderful, mysterious find and gave it away with reluctance. She didn't seem quite as captivated by it as I'd hoped. I wonder if she still has it.

I'd been back in England a year or so when I heard that she and her husband Tony were coming to Leeds to perform at the art college and they accepted my invitation to stay, bringing their small daughter Kyoko with them. Their performance included two items, the principal one being the Black Bag, and another which was a version of the party game in which a sentence is passed in whispers along a row of people. In the game the message is quite garbled by the time it reaches the last person. Yoko put her mouth to the ear of a speaker at the end of the front row of seats and instructed him to 'pass it on' along all the rows to the last seat of the back of the theatre, whilst she got on with something else. Later she asked what had arrived at the end and at various points en route. Strangely dissimilar words, tunes and noises emerged. It was then revealed that Yoko had whispered - you've guessed it - nothing at all.

The black bag was roomy enough for two people to climb into it easily. Once inside and lying on the floor, Yoko and Tony closed the entrance. For a while nothing much happened. A lecture theatre full of people gazed in expectant silence at a black lump on the platform. When those in the bag moved the audience began to speculate about their actions. It did look as if they might be undressing. The bag writhed and fidgeted. Where they naked now? Were those projections knees or

elbows? Was it an embrace? Another long pause... Now they seem to be struggling. They can't be making love. Can they? It went on for at least half an hour. When they finally came out of the bag they were just as they had been when they went in. Whatever had gone on in the bag had only happened in the spectators' thoughts. Just as it had invented the whispered 'message', the imagination of the audience had written the script of the bag. On another occasion Tony summed it up as 'trying to involve the audience in the creative process itself'.

Yoko and Tony were undemanding guests, not expecting, or even wanting, to be taken to see the sights of Yorkshire. They ate an inordinate amount of brown rice. Yoko entertained my children – all of us – by making superb origami birds and animals. We strung them on a thread where, in the weeks that followed, the cat played with them and finally tore them to shreds. I wish I had kept them.

Yoko was planning a film and needed some cash to start it. I lent her £50. My contribution was acknowledged in the titles of that underground masterpiece *Bottoms* in which 100 people's behinds are filmed, each for 20 seconds as they walked on an endless belt. The cinema screen was divided by a wobbly cross of shadow into four areas of softly undulating flesh. No two actors' performances were the same. The variety of forms of the human hindquarters has to be seen to be appreciated. The film has everything: a riveting theme with a hundred variations, formal consistency, human interest and a laugh a minute.

Actors had been recruited by advertising people to take part in an avant-garde film production, and when interviewed they had talked, some quite fulsomely, about their suitability for and experience of experimental theatre. Not all took kindly to it when told what role they were being asked to perform. The soundtrack of the film was made-up from these interviews but, hilarious as this accompaniment was, it could just as well have been a Bach fugue, so exquisite was the formal rhythm of the thing.

Before the film came out Yoko sent me a cheque repaying half the debt and later Tony directed me to collect the other half from Apple. I waited one morning in the shadow of Paul McCartney with the teenybopper fans and was given £25 in cash by The Beatles' new financial manager.

Months later a delivery man looked for me in the office of my department in the university and was sent by the secretary to my home. To my wife he delivered a huge bouquet of white flowers among which nestled another £25 cheque and a card which read 'Love and peace. John and Yoko.'

I posted this extra cheque back to Yoko at Apple. A week later it returned, stamped 'Not known at this address.'

For John Jones's edited interview with Yoko Ono see *The American Art Tapes* (Tate Publishing)