Instruction Paintings:
Yoko Ono and the Narratives of Modernism

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Yoko Ono is often cited as "one of the world's most famous unknown artists."[1] Initially rejected by the art world on the basis of her gender, race, and upbringing, Ono's important contributions to the international art world of the 1960s and '70s was largely forgotten for several reasons, including her later marriage to Lennon, when she became known simply as the woman who "broke up the Beatles." This view of Ono as an artist and as a cultural figure extended into her reception within the academy and art institutions until the last few decades. However, what catalogues and retrospectives have tried to achieve in the last twenty years is to highlight the innovation, creativity, and depth of the many works she has produced throughout her long career. Part of what makes Ono so difficult to deal with *within* the art world is that her work is interdisciplinary, and she consciously avoids associating herself with one specific group or movement. As Alexandra Munroe notes, "originally, the difficulty of categorizing her work, the ambiguities of her insider/outsider status to contemporary art movements such as Conceptualism, and the unprecedented diversity of her artistic worlds all presented obstacles," to include Ono in the canon of postwar modernism.[2]

This paper looks at the work and legacy of Yoko Ono, her reception, and her relationship to the centers and peripheries of modernism, postmodernism, and conceptual art in the 1960s. I argue that to fully appreciate the work of Ono (and other artists who have complex identities and relationships to the "center"), we must be conscious of intersectional readings and multiple narratives. Art history and art institutions have a tendency to define the work and life of artists by a single narrative, yet Yoko Ono demonstrates how an artist may embody and make contact with multiple identities, as well as spatial and temporal locations that intersect to create the work of art. Ono's work was largely misunderstood while she was most active in the '60s, and even more so after her marriage to John Lennon, whose media legacy largely overshadowed her own reputation. Ono was a leading artist in the conceptual art movement in North America, an achievement which was regularly denied to her in the '60s and '70s as, she has said, "they didn't want me to get the credit."[3] Her performance art, and that of several of her contemporaries like Charlotte Moorman, was largely ignored in canonical narratives because performance art became historically associated with the feminist art movement of the '70s, something Ono and her peers did not formally engage with in the '60s.[4] And within Japan, Ono was equally misunderstood – she was advertised as a novelty

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[1] A quote that can be attributed to Ono's late husband John Lennon. Alexandra Munroe, "Spirit of YES: The Art and Life of Yoko Ono," in YES Yoko Ono, Alexandra Munroe and Jon Hendricks, eds., (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000): 12.

[2] Munroe, "The Spirit of YES," in *YES Yoko Ono*, 11.

[3] Julia Peyton-Jones, and Hans Ulbrich Obrist, "Interview with Yoko Ono," in *Yoko Ono: To the Light*, (London: Koenig Books, 2012): 37.

[4] Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York.*, (New Jersey: Rutgers

act, her work interpreted as "eccentric," and within the scholarship on Ono, few significant links have been drawn between her activities and the significant avant-garde artists and art collectives in Japan while she was there.

Her own identity and biography have also greatly influenced the scholarship around her and other significant women artists from Japan who traveled throughout the West during this time. While Japan was the site for several highly innovative avant-garde groups after World War II, the Japanese art establishment largely followed Western trends and purchased Western art, many experimental Japanese artists moving to the city in the 1950s and '60s. Yet as Midori Yoshimoto posits, "Ironically, by moving to their dream city, Japanese women artists were doubly removed from the centre of the American art world by their ethnicity and gender."[5] Therefore, an important aspect of my investigation is looking at the centre-periphery relationship in the establishment of modernism, one which is undoubtedly complicated by gender in the case of Ono. These complications are investigated using the ideas formulated by Intersectional theory. First developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the particular marginalization faced by Black women in the United States, intersectionality is now used to examine how a wide variety of people are affected by intertwined factors such as race, gender, or class, and oppressed in specific and harmful ways.[6] Ono's career, and particularly her reception into the canon, was impacted by the particular manner in which her several identities collided, affecting her in different times and places, and in ways many of her white or male peers did not experience. Yet Ono should not be purely considered a victim, but as a complicated, yet marginalized person. She herself asserts that "in a way, I created a power as an outsider. I mean, being an outsider is an incredible power, actually. I always think that you should never be in the center. Center is a blind spot because you can't see anybody. You are being seen, but you can't see anybody."[7]

War Art

While this paper seeks to question the role of narrative in the writing of history, I begin my narrative of Ono's work in Japan in September 1931: the month that the Kwantung Army was able to bypass the Japanese government and initiate the invasion of Manchuria. By 1937, the invasion had escalated to an undeclared war with China.[8] War and militarization had permeated every aspect of civilian life; surveillance was a part of everyday experience, and every citizen was expected to "do their part" for the war effort.[9] The Prime Minister was usurped by Army General Tojo Hideki in 1941, and this escalating state of affairs prompted the United States to place an embargo on Japan. This led to the attacks at Pearl Harbour and in Shanghai in December of 1941, which would be the culmination of the Japanese military's

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University Press, 2005): 5-6.

[5] Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance*, 4.

[6] Devon W. Carbado, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Vickie M. Mays, and Barbara Tomlinson. "Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory." *Du Bois Review*, 10, 2 (2013): 303.

[7] Yoshimoto, 195.

[8] "Introduction," in *Art and War in Japan and Its Empire 1931-1960*, Ikeda Asato, Aya Louisa McDonald and Ming Tiampo, eds., (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013): 14, 15.

[9] Kawata Akihisa, "Embodiment/Disembodiment in Japanese Painting During the Fifteen-Year War ," *Art and War in Japan*, 30.

strength in the war.[10]

Throughout this tumultuous period, artists also did their part of the war effort by concentrating on war paintings. War paintings marked a great aesthetic departure from dominant visual art forms seen in Japan until this point in time. While recent scholarship demonstrates that, contrary to popular belief, traditional Japanese art has supposedly used "Western" pictorial devices such as recessional representations of space, it was primarily through war painting that the "dominant" form of art throughout Japan in the twentieth century went through radical visual changes. In war painting, Japanese artists embraced realism and *yōga* (Western-style painting) as an equally legitimate source of patriotic expression as *nihonga*, or traditional Japanese art practices. [11] Artists were encouraged to act as witnesses to the bravery exhibited by Japanese soldiers on the battlefield (fig. 1). War painting (*sensōga*) was meant to serve as "objective" documentary evidence in support of the Japanese military, but in reality, it effectively served as propaganda. While Japanese artists were indeed adopting Western mediums of oil on canvas and European realism as a style to depict the brutality of war, they were adopting these styles for specific social and political reasons relating to a specific time and place, and using modernist aesthetics to articulate a specific Japanese reality.[12] On top of being an innovative artistic achievement, war art constituted an important part of everyday cultural experience for citizens during this period. As Akihisha posits, "The numbers speak to the fact that *sensōga* was a type of basic necessity for the public during the war's final stages." [13] War had thus clearly permeated every social and cultural aspect of Japanese society in the 1940s. While art and culture were clearly perceived as important parts of Japanese identity, the structure of the art market in Japan in the twentieth century was highly bureaucratic, hierarchical, and increasingly Western-oriented. The Japanese art establishment, since the mid-nineteenth century, had developed a strong desire to import and emulate Western artistic production; most galleries and collectors were interested either in Western impressionist or modernist masterpieces (such as Van Gogh, Cezanne, or Matisse), or *nihonga* from Japanese artists.[14]

Fig. 1: Foujita Tsuguharu, *Last Stand on Attu*, 1943. The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

Emerging from this context, a younger generation of Japanese artists was determined

[10] "Introduction," *Art and War in Japan*, 16.

[11] Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011): 16.

[12] John M Rosenfield, "Nihonga and Its Resistance to 'the Scorching Drought of Modern Vulgarity," in *Births and Rebirths in Japanese* Art (Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 20101): 189.

[13] Akihisha, *Art and War in Japan*, 33.

[14] Yoshimoto, 11-13; Chong, Doryun, "Tokyo 1955-1970," in *Tokyo 1955-1970 A New Avant-Garde,* Diana C. Stoll, ed., (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012): 33, 34; Rosenfeld, *Births and Rebirths in Japanese Art*, 189-193.

to instigate social change through new kinds of art. Many active, important avant-garde artistic collectives such as Jikken Kōbō and Gutai sprouted out of the post-war period in Japan, and placed emphasis on originality and experimentation as a way to challenge the extremely bureaucratic and hierarchical Japanese art world of the early twentieth century.

Yoko Ono

Yoko Ono was born in 1933 in Tokyo, in the middle of a tumultuous period of war; though she spent most of her early life in the United States.[15] Her mother was heir to an extremely large banking fortune, and her father, also a banker, was of aristocratic heritage.[16] The family was living in Tokyo again by the time Ono was twelve, but were then forced to evacuate to the countryside in the 1940s under the threat of American air raids in the cities.[17] This period of Ono's life was clearly formative to her identity as an artist and as a person. She often tells stories of her time in the Japanese countryside when discussing her art, frequently referencing how "lying on our backs, looking up at the sky through an opening in the roof, [my brother and I] exchanged menus in the air and used our powers of visualization to survive."[18]

Attending Gakushuin University as the first female philosophy student, Ono was coming of age in post-war Japan as many avant-garde collectives and artists were beginning their practices. Gutai and similar avant-garde collectives were gaining attention, if not from galleries and critics, then at least from like-minded peers. Artists like Kazuo Shiraga experimented with notions of painting, performance, and the body, typically creating paintings with his feet. In his most famous piece *Challenging Mud*, Shiraga uses his entire body to wrestle with the Earth and liquid concrete, a piece that is part-performance, part-painting. The work ultimately solidifies and becomes a permanent, gestural reminder of his struggle (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Kazuo Shiraga, *Challenging Mud*, 1955. Photo: Ashiya City Museum of Art & History.

While drawing and painting evolved very quickly through these post-war avant-garde movements, these young artists also experimented with performance, both within conventional performance spaces, as well as outside on the street. Such performances, like the *Yamanote Line Incident* (performed by Jikken Kōbō), in which several artists performed in the middle of a packed train car, were contemporaneously accused of being derived from Allan Kaprow's *Happenings in the United States*.[19] However, by looking at the social context

[15] Alexandra Munroe, "Spirit of YES," in *YES Yoko Ono*, 14.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid; 14-15.
[18] Ibid; 13.
[19] Chong, *Tokyo 1955-1970*, 27, 28.

surrounding these young artists, and their desire for change, it is clear that these performances, like war art, were a temporally and spatially specific response to the context in which these artists practiced, originating as a particular means of de-stabilizing the status quo and normal day-to-day life.

Within these avant-garde groups, Gutai has received the most scholarly attention. This is likely due to Gutai making a significant effort, in the form of performances, exhibitions, and especially print materials, to interact with a Western audience.[20] Still, even Gutai is highly marginalized within artistic and academic institutions (even in Japan), which further speaks to how marginalized the Japanese avant-garde is as a whole. Hence, re-examining the work of artists such as Yoko Ono, who was herself highly marginalizedand subsequently more accepted into the canon of contemporary art history, can help shed light on similarly marginalized artists by connecting similar points of contact and inspiration. Ono's work is particularly important as she was a highly influential artist with the East and West, and can serve as an example of how art from different places communicates and culminates into important contemporary artistic contributions.

Ono moved to New York in the 1950s to join her family and attend Sarah Lawrence College. While she moved to New York for family, it is clear that Ono, like many others, believed New York to be the center of the art world on an international level.[21] In fact, many Japanese artists were moving to New York in the 1960s to become part of the burgeoning arts scene, something Midori Yoshimoto documents in her book *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*. Many other Asian artists such as Nam June Paik and Shigeko Kubota were members of Fluxus, a purportedly international collective, yet they also felt the need to work and live in New York, and have their work perceived within a Western context in order to be taken seriously; speaking to the very real spatial barriers constituting modernism throughout the twentieth century. Ono had a keen sense of the spatial barriers she faced from her upbringing going back and forth from New York to Tokyo, not feeling totally welcomed in either place. She certainly would have been exposed to avant-garde Japanese artists through her first husband, Toshi Ichiyanagi, an experimental composer whose success overshadowed Ono's in the early part of her career. As a classically trained pianist, Ono initially wanted to pursue experimental music and conducting like Ichiyanagi and the artists in his circle, but decided she could not find an adequate space for such performances.

At the suggestion of her husband, she purchased a loft and began holding experimental "loft concerts," primarily featuring the work of her friends George Brecht and La Monte Young, American experimental composers and artists.[22] Through these concerts, Ono was introduced to artist George Maciunas, who was heavily involved in the experimental art scene in New York. These concerts were to become the foundations of the conceptual art group Fluxus, an international art collective which brought together the work of like-minded artists for Fluxus events, shows, and object-based productions, and was organized primarily

[20] Yoshimoto, 3.

[21] "(…) going to London for me was like *miyaho-ochi* which is the Japanese expression for going away from the capital. I thought I was leaving the centre of the world called New York." Peyton-Jones and Obrist, "Interview with Yoko Ono," in *Yoko Ono: To the Light*, 34.

[22] Peyton-Jones and Obrist, "Interview with Yoko Ono," in *Yoko Ono: To the Light*: 34-37; Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 22.

through Maciunas, whose vision was largely influenced by the work of Ono and John Cage.[23]

The media often denied Ono's importance to the loft concerts, listing her simply as the "owner" of the loft, whereas Maciunas was cited as the sole organizer of these events.[24] Jon Hendricks, a former member, describes Fluxus as a "phenomenon," noting that "clearly, DADA was a precursor to Fluxus. Both sought to unnerve a complacent, militaristic, decadent society by bringing art into direct confrontation with triviality and aesthetic, and to controvert the idea that art is incapable of affecting social or political change."[25] Thus, in a similar vein to Japanese avant-garde collectives, Fluxus sought to provoke social and political change through provocative, transgressive artwork that diminished the borders between art and life and questioned the entire premise of fine art—questions which were brought to the fore in Ono's work in particular.[26]

LIGHTING PIECE

Light a match and watch until it goes out.

1955 Autumn

Fig. 3 Yoko Ono, *Lighting Piece*, 1955.

Ono's scores (what she later called Instruction Paintings) constitute the bulk of her body of work, and formed the basis for her performances and most of her contributions to Fluxus. These were powerful and concise ways to combine Ono's passion for experimental composition with her desire to participate in the visual art scene in New York. Thus she composed "scores" for her "paintings," which are primarily to be constructed in the viewer's mind. The instruction paintings are literally composed of instructions presented written or printed on a piece of paper. Some, like *Lighting Piece* (fig.3), or *Smoke Painting* are at times enacted, other ones, like *Sun Piece* are physically impossible and are meant to be imagined in the mind of the viewer. Ono chose this format because it "gave me the freedom to do all sorts of things that you can't do in the material world."[27] "Among my instruction paintings," she writes, "my interest is mainly in 'painting to construct in your head.' In your head for instance, it is possible for a straight line to exist-not as a segment of a curve but as a straight line." The Instruction Paintings truly emphasize the extent to which Ono places significance on the *viewer* in her artwork: for the vast majority of her pieces, the viewer's participation is absolutely required for the piece to be completed: in the case of instruction paintings, the actual visual image does not exist if the viewer does not participate and imagine the consequences of the instructions. This highly conceptual nature of her art—the fact that it is to be "performed" or "painted" purely in the *mind* of the viewer—led to further institutional marginalization of the artist. Her works were criticized as purely "eccentric," and many understood her works as an experimental type of poetry, or as instructions to be performed by Ono herself, not as conceptual instructions for acts the viewer could imagine for themselves.[28]

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[23] Ken Friedman, "Freedom? Nothingness? Time? Fluxus and the Laboratory of Ideas", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 29, No. 7/8 (2012): 375-377.

[24] Yoshimoto, 85.

[25] Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 21.

[26] Friedman, 379.

[27] Peyton-Jones and Obrist, "Interview with Yoko Ono," in *Yoko Ono: To the Light*: 37.

[28] Yoshimoto, 96.

Through her concerts, Ono was also introduced to John Cage, who became an important collaborator in her work and in Fluxus. Cage and his followers drew influence from Zen Buddhism in their art—something with which Ono was already familiar, but was foreign and exciting to New York artists.[29] Cage would remain an important collaborator for much of Ono's career as she engaged in more performances, both in New York and in Japan.. Most significantly, she performed with John Cage and David Tudor for two weeks in Japan in 1962. Cage gave six concerts across Japan during his month-long stay in the country, and his impact upon young artists was so powerful it was termed "Cage Shock."[30] Ono often performed alongside him, yet she was rarely credited as anything more than a performer of *Cage's* work, and not a true artist herself.[31] While Cage may have inspired Ono's performative work in some degree, Ono has effectively been put into a position in which she was forced to deny any influence in order to maintain the authenticity of her original ideas. To admit that Cage had influenced her work in any way could be seen as admitting to claims that her work was simply derivative of his, while in reality it builds upon and pushes the boundaries of any ideas he had already established.[32]

Ono's instruction paintings were first hung in group shows in Maciunas' AG Gallery and were sometimes included as Fluxus works, and other times performed as solo works. Though Ono would go on to have her own solo exhibitions at AG Gallery because of how significantly her art resonated with Maciunas and his ideas for Fluxus, it must be noted that Ono herself also made a conscious effort to distance herself from any particular collective. For example, while Maciunas initially wanted to publish a collection of Ono's instruction paintings as a Fluxus work, Ono decided to publish it herself. The result was *Grapefruit*, Ono's first book of instructions, and one of her more important works which made her art accessible to a much wider audience.[33]

Fig. 4: Yoko Ono, *AMAZE*, 1971 / 2012. Photo: Serpentine Gallery.

Though Ono may have attempted, at times, to distance herself from Fluxus, her contributions to the foundational ideas of the movement should not be understated. The "strategy" Maciunas concocted for Fluxus was "based on Ono's example: an artist would give Maciunas an idea, he would interpret its contents, and produce an edition of the work as a

[29] Friedman, 380.
[30] Chong, "Tokyo: 1955-1970," 70.
[31] Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's 'Cut Piece': From Text to Performance and Back Again." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol 30, No 3 (September 2000): 82.
[32] What Ono does acknowledge is that "what Cage gave me was confidence that the direction I was going in was not crazy." "Mix a Building and the Wind New York, November 2001," in Obrist, Hans Ulrich, *Yoko Ono* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2009): 12.
[33] Jon Hendricks, "Yoko Ono and Fluxus," in *YES Yoko Ono*, 42.

cheap, repeatable, mass-producible objects, thus undermining, in his mind, the preciousness of art."[34] Even outside of purely Fluxus-based events, Maciunas collaborated with Ono and created the physical sculptures for many of Ono's projects, like *AMAZE* (fig. 4). Ono, in turn, organized several events, such as *Morning Piece* and *13 Days Do-It-Yourself Dance Festival* that constituted important Fluxus moments, speaking to the ultimately reciprocal relationship Ono had with the collective.[35,36]

While Ono's contributions to Fluxus and to the history of conceptual and performance art seem quite evident, her work was largely discredited institutionally until within the last two decades. As a Japanese woman living in America in the decades immediately following World War II, one may imagine that Ono's race and gender played a significant role in the creation of her work and how it was received—as Midori Yoshimoto has asserted, this was just the case for many such female Japanese artists practicing in post-war America. Yet it is equally evident that Ono *herself* made clear and conscious efforts to avoid association with any one particular art movement or collective, preferring to stand apart as an individual—a move which, in terms of the narrativity of art history, makes Ono hard to place and define.

Ono's involvement with Fluxus was, in part, the reason she moved back to Tokyo in the early 1960s: as her involvement with the group was growing more intense, she decided to break away and try to stake out a claim as an individual artist in Japan.[37] It was during her stay in Japan (1962-65) that Ono began to fully realize the extent to which her hybrid identity—being an upper class woman of Japanese heritage and largely American upbringing—would deny her access to so many parts of the art world across the globe. Ono likely expected a different reception of her work within Japan, perceiving racism and sexism in the United States to be the primary reasons her work was being neglected by the larger art media at the time. Yet, while racism and sexism affected Ono in one particular way in the United States, these were not concepts that disappeared within Japan.

As Yoshimoto asserts, it was not just the bureaucracy of the Japanese art world which made Japan such a difficult place in which to succeed as an avant-gardist: gendered divisions within larger society greatly affected women with artistic aspirations, as education for women in Japan in the early twentieth century was still largely limited to traditionally "feminine" skills that would be required for domestic roles. [38] While male avant-garde artists within Japan were already challenged by the Western-oriented Japanese art world, women artists were doubly constrained by these gender roles, and their work was often perceived as being in the *joryū* style, known as the "housewife" style.[39] While Gutai and Jikken Kōbō had already been active in Japan since the 1950s, avant-garde art was still not generally accepted as the "norm" in Japan while Yoko Ono lived in Tokyo. While many avant-garde artists such as Shinohara

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[34] Jon Hendricks, "Yoko Ono and Fluxus," 40, 41.

[35] In *Morning Piece*, Ono listed several mornings on different dates in the future for "sale." The New York performance was dedicated to Maciunas. Ibid; 45.

[36] While this event was advertised for people to participate on their own, some of the events were actually enacted depending on feasibility and imagination. *Grapefruit* and Yoshimoto, 105; Hendricks, *Fluxus Codex*, 416.

[37] Munroe, "The Spirit of YES," in *YES Yoko Ono*, 17.

[38] Yoshimoto, 14.

[39] Ibid; 13.

Ushio, and Genpei Akasegawa, among others, were hitting their stride in the early 1960s, and venues like the Sōgetsu Art Center were growing to have reputations as centers of experimental art and theatre, many Japanese art-lovers simply did not "get" these new artistic movements, which were truly more "anti-art," than art in a more traditional sense.[40] When Ono moved to Japan, it was under the impression that Japanese audiences would understand the themes in her work that American audiences were not picking up on, or would at least understand its originality where American critics found her work derivative (primarily in comparison to the work of the much more successful Cage).[41] And while this was true to some extent, Ono's work was primarily advertised as a novelty act: the work of a young girl who had grown up in America, to come back to Japan with her eccentric ideas.[42]

Cut Piece

Ono's reception in New York and in Japan at this time demonstrates her more general subsequent integration into the canon. Within the literature, this reception is typically exemplified by examinations of Ono's most sensational work: her performances of *Cut Piece*. That Ono's instruction paintings were largely misinterpreted as instructions to actually be performed is translated into the limited academic literature on the artist, in which she is typically described as a performance artist.[43] *Cut Piece* has received more attention than Ono's other works because of the variety of reactions it stimulated, and the many interpretations historians and critics have garnered from the work.

Cut Piece functions as most of Ono's performances do, in which the written instruction acted as a "score" for the performance: Ono would begin by instructing the audience to do something, and the performance generally ended when audience participation did, be that cutting, dancing, jumping, or listening. In *Cut Piece*, first performed in Kyoto in 1964, Ono sat on a stage and invited the audience to line up and, one by one, approach her, cut a piece of her clothing, and take it with them. The piece has traditionally been interpreted as a feminist work, though Ono herself only seems to have incorporated the feminist aspects into it in much later performances.[44] As Kevin Concannon notes, the immediate (and, for many years, almost exclusively) feminist interpretations of the work are evidence of problematic interpretations of a work as feminist solely on the basis that the performer and the performing body is female.[45] The performance is typically assumed to be feminist in that viewers are slowly exposing the body of the (in this case, female) performer; the piece was

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[40] Chong, in Tokyo 1955-1970, 70.
[41] Cage's popularity and importance to the avant-garde scene in both New York and Japan cannot be overstated, as some of his followers even referred to him as "Jesus Christ." Many have noted that Ono's work in fact challenges many of the established notions of Cage's work. However, the reality that much of Cage's work, such as his famous 4'33", rely on audience participation, just as Ono's work does, has led to accusations that Ono's work was simply copying Cage's ideas, rather than perceiving her work as original and *in dialog with* Cage's work. Yoshimoto, 94-95; Concannon, 91.
[42] This poor reception of her work contributed to a nervous breakdown Ono had, culminating in an extended hospital stay in 1963. Yoshimoto, 92.
[43] Deborah K Ultan, "From the Personal to the Transpersonal: Self Reclamation Through Ritual-in-Performance," Art Documentation Vol. 20, No. 2, (2001): pp. 30-36.
[44] Concannon, 88.
[45] Ibid; 82-84.

then typically interpreted as speaking to problems of violence against women, the male gaze, and the perceived vulnerability of the female body—yet if a man were to perform the piece, these meanings would be lost.[46]

Because Ono did not, at the time, explicitly acknowledge any feminist tones to *Cut Piece*, or any of her other performances, the work of her and other, similar women performance artists (many of whom were associated with Fluxus) of the 1960s were subsequently left out of performance art canons, which narratively rooted the beginning of performance art in the feminist art movement in the 1970s.[47] While Ono, in much later performances in the 1990s, *did* incorporate feminism into the piece, the 1960s version of *Cut Piece* was effectively in a double-bind that re-iterates the constraints placed on Ono as an artist: perceived at once as obviously feminist on the basis of Ono's gender, yet not feminist enough to be considered a part of the canon. The more complicated issues that *Cut Piece* addressed were swept aside simply because Ono is female.

Such themes have been brought to the fore in more recent years by scholars such as Julia Bryan-Wilson, who re-examines *Cut Piece* in terms of Ono's upbringing in Japan during the Second World War, writing that "the nudity in *Cut Piece* is not so much the index of its maker's status as a woman as it is the vehicle for the work's key metaphor."[48] Bryan-Wilson argued on the basis that "Fluxus events and Body art are often understood through the discourse of catastrophe," *Cut Piece* is truly understood in the context of postwar Japan and the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "Those too close to the blast died, but those who were near had their clothes ripped off. These images inflect *Cut Piece* with the conceit of the performing body as witness, silently but soberly giving testimony."[49] Bryan-Wilson also underlines the importance of the consensual nature of the performance. While many are quick to see *Cut Piece* as a performance of violence to the female body, Bryan-Wilson sees the opposite—Ono *invites* the viewer to this action and, indeed, without their participation, the piece does not exist.[50] In this way it differs significantly from Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm Zero*, to which the piece is frequently compared. Subsequent re-readings of Ono's work in the framework of postwar Japan, performativity, and feminism have grown in recent years by scholars such as Deborah Ultan and Kevin Concannon, but this still leaves the problem of Ono's *other* works: while *Cut Piece* is finally receiving its due, most of Ono's other important instructions, performances and objects are still neglected by art history and are just in recent decades being incorporated into museum and gallery settings.

The Narrative and the Canon

One must therefore ask: is it necessary to take one work, or one narrative, as representative of a heretofore largely unrecognized artist in order to *begin* to fully appreciate the complexity of their work, or their contributions to the art world? Ono is typically "recovered" into the canon of art history from a feminist perspective, as one of the first female conceptual artists to have been given space to practice in the Western narrative—yet this also

[46] Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Remembering Yoko Ono's 'Cut Piece'," *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2003): 103.
[47] Elena Zanichelli, *Women in Fluxus & Other Experimental Tales*: (Milan: Skira, 2012): 191-197.
[48] Bryan-Wilson, 103.
[49] Ibid; 105, 108-109.
[50] Ibid; 106, 107.

tends to ignore how her work speaks to other important issues outside of a specifically Western context. While a feminist method will highlight how the artist's work engages with and is influenced by her or his gender, looking at the work exclusively through this lens inherently excludes other interpretations which of course must be present if Ono did not intend for her work to be explicitly feminist in the first place. Thus, while a feminist method might seek to aid studies of women who have been marginalized on the basis of their gender, it neglects how these women have been marginalized in other ways; how artists like Ono were not only sexualized but also exoticized on the basis of her gender *and* her race.[51] As scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty began discussing thirty years ago, a purely feminist method typically assumes many things about the subject (namely oppression) while neglecting difference in many other contexts.[52] Mohanty argues that the assumption of women as an oppressed group, in literature on the third world and other peripheries, has had the result that "Western feminists alone become the true "subjects" of this counter-history."[53] Thus by looking at how artists like Ono were oppressed in certain ways, and given agency in others, we can begin to construct a more complete view of her work and her identity as an artist.

Thus we might also examine how Ono was privileged if we look at the financial situation of women artists traveling to New York from Japan. As Yoshimoto notes in her survey *Into Performance*, Japanese women artists practicing in New York are still largely marginalized within the canon, yet simply being active, geographically, within the "center," of modernism in the 1960s has encouraged more scholarship on these women (such as Yayoi Kasuma, Ono, or Shigeko Kubota) than on their counterparts who remained in Japan (like Atsuko Tanaka, discussed later). Likewise, having the financial means to support oneself abroad allowed these artists opportunities to be daring and creative with their practices, while most women in Japan struggled enough trying to break out of traditional gender roles. Thus, at a minimum, Ono's gender, race, and financial situation should be taken into account at the same time if we are to base a reading of her work off of either one of these things—as it should be for all artists. Looking at Ono's work from a strictly feminist, or even strictly postcolonial point of view is limiting, particularly in the context of how these theories originate primarily within a Western framework.

A more intersectional reading demonstrates that "Japanese Art" typically defines the work of male Japanese artists, while "Woman artist" typically describes Western, or white women. Ono, as a Japanese woman mainly practicing in the West, defies both these categories, and her and her work are not easy to "place," and it is primarily on this basis that she has been left out of several canons. As Carbado et al note, "theory is never done, nor exhausted by its prior articulations or movements; it is always already an analysis-in-progress;" and thus acknowledging this constantly changing nature of theory aids in

[51] For example, Concannon cites a 1968 issue of *TAB* magazine, which describes Ono's *Cut Piece*: "Yoko Ono's "art" striptease still seems like a striptease to excited viewers. The difference here is that Yoko, a Japanese lovely now performing on the continent, does not take her clothing off…. The audience does it for her. Guys who used to sit back and yell 'Take if off!' now have the golden opportunity to take it off for her." "The Hippiest Artistic Happening: 'Step Up and Strip Me Nude," *TAB* 18,2 (June 1968) in Concannon, 90.

[52] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *boundary 2*, Vol. 12/13 (Spring-Autumn 1984): 337.

[53] Ibid; 351.

constantly re-evaluating established truths within art history. [54]

Ono's work is also traditionally "legitimized" by associating her work and practice with Western artists and narratives. Similar to how her performances are automatically associated with feminist practices on the basis of Ono's gender, on a conceptual level her own work is associated to that of the Western (typically white American male) peers within her circle in an effort to better understand her own work. *Cut Piece* is usually located within the Western tradition of art history, finding originality in performing the female body and in breaking down the barriers between artist and audience, diminishing the preciousness of art in the same vein as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*.[55] By placing the conception of performance art within the feminist art movement of the 1970s, the canon situated performance art within the West spatially, and situates the ideas at the basis of performance art into a specific Western time, in which the body is being performed in a particularly political way. Yet we also know that artists like Ono, Charlotte Moorman, and Carolee Schneeman were performing the female body in the 1960s in an explicitly female but not explicitly *feminist* way.[56] It should be equally evident that framing early performance art in a purely feminist framework is problematic in the typical tendency of feminist theory to work within a Western framework—not only did Ono and other Fluxus women come before performance artists of the 1970s to little or no fanfare; artists in Japan were already using the body to perform their works as early as the 1950s—a fact which is equally neglected in the historical narrative of performance art.

As Bryan-Wilson is able to recover the Japanese political context that informs *Cut Piece*, a re-reading of Ono's other works, and those of other "peripheral" artists helps us to understand the originality inherent to these works, and allows us to appreciate a more reciprocal relationship between center and periphery. As Japanese avant-garde artists (like Atsuka Tanaka, Ay-O, and other members of Gutai and similar collectives) were using original interventions for the particular context in which they practiced, and borrowing from Western avant-garde practices as they needed, Ono, too, very clearly reacted to the war she had experienced in her upbringing, while also maintaining an active practice in New York. Her work, therefore, exists in and reacts to two simultaneous geographic and temporal realities, in both the East and West.

It seems evident that her work strives for freedom, particularly in their attempts to achieve a state of *mental* freedom; though this is perhaps made most obvious in her collaborative *War is Over* campaign with Lennon. Ono experienced World War II as a young girl in the Japanese countryside, constantly in fear of starvation and American bombs, and

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[54] Carbado et al., 304.

[55]Munroe, "The Spirit of YES," 12. Ono's own writing also makes clear she was conscious of acting within the Western canon: "My paintings, which are all instruction paintings (and meant for others to do), came after collage and assemblage (1915) and happening (1905) came into the art world. Considering the nature of my painting, any of the above three words or a new word can be used instead of the word, painting. But I like the old word painting because it immediately connects with "wall painting" painting, and it is nice and funny." "To the Wesleyan People," in *Grapefruit* (unpaginated).

[56] "Explicitly female," in that these artists performed their bodies as non-sexualized bodies, which departed significantly from the female bodies appearing in work of Surrealist of Dada artists more recently.

subsequently experienced the Vietnam war as a woman with a voice in the West and the power to effect change. Thus, a more comprehensive, complex, and intersectional reading of her works is called for at this point in history.

Questioning the Canon

How, then, do we "qualify" Ono? In spite of her major contributions to conceptual art around the globe, this has been the big hurdle in her reception as an artist. While an important figure in the formation of Fluxus, she at times wished to disassociate herself from it, which partially led to her exclusion from its history. While she clearly draws inspiration from the Western canon, she also acknowledges consistent, significant inspiration from Japanese cultural tradition within her work. And while she currently lives and works in New York, and is considered primarily a Western artist, it is apparent that most of her work is more wholly understood by likening it to the Japanese avant-garde and modernisms as well.

As Ming Tiampo astutely notes, the art historical narratives of modernism have traditionally not allowed for reciprocal or even hybrid inspiration between center and periphery. This draws back to Tiampo's concept of "cultural mercantilism," in which the center (in this case the Western art world) appropriates cultural works from peripheries as inauthentic "raw materials," with which to create "real" or "authentic" modern art, and subsequently denying peripheries to do the same, thus ensuring the continued cultural dominance of the center.[57] From this point of view, terms like "international" lose meaning when history becomes involved. It is a human tendency and historical necessity to geographically and temporally situate historical phenomena—thus in spite of Fluxus' international involvement, it essentially functioned as a New York-based movement with peripheries in Europe and Japan. Similarly, Tiampo notes that "despite Gutai's conscious internationalism, the group has consistently been reinscribed by critics, scholars, curators, and collectors into a Japanese history of art."[58] As the Japanese avant-garde has gone underappreciated in the canon of modernism until quite recently—both within Japanese and English scholarship—looking to these peripheries for inspiration de-stabilizes centrality of supposed originality of the Western avant-garde. While the work of Dada and Surrealist artists, for example, was modern in its rupture from traditional Western art, the work of collectives like Gutai and Hi-Red Center was consistently considered derivative of Western avant-garde traditions, and not original in how it reacted to its *own* particular cultural surroundings and needs. To use Tiampo's term, by "decentering" modernisms, we can grow to appreciate the true achievements of so-called peripheral artists and collectives. By decentering Ono as a purely "Western" artist and truly acknowledging the global extent of her activities, we can come to appreciate not only *her* important contributions to conceptual art worldwide, but we can acknowledge the dialogue that was clearly happening between East and West, and perhaps, historically, inject agency back into this imbalanced yet reciprocal relationship.

Ono participated as a member of the Japanese avant-garde while she practiced in Japan in the early 1960s. However, she is primarily viewed as an artist who was bringing *Western* ideas back to Japan through her work—and those ideas themselves were largely

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[57] Tiampo, 14-15.
[58] Tiampo, 6.

perceived as derivative of the work of Cage and other artists in her New York circle. Ono herself was thus at the short end of this "cultural mercantilism": perceived as too Eastern, too female, or too famous to produce "real" art in New York, and too Western to produce anything "authentic," or meaningful within Japan, Ono's work was only later appreciated through the lens of Western feminism which is not even wholly appropriate.

Understanding Ono's work within the context of the Japanese avant-garde (in addition to her contributions to the Western canon) can at least serve to give us a more complete picture of what her activities in the 1960s were really about—equally, from her newly privileged position within the institution, a re-examination of her work can help us appreciate the original contributions of artists practicing within Japan in the same decades. For instance, rather than drawing connections between Ono's *Cut Piece* and, say, Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm Zero* (a comparison that is made often), it might be more productive to look at works like Ono's *Strip Tease for Three* and Atsuka Tanaka's *Electric Dress* (fig. 5). When performed, *Strip Tease For Three* consisted of three empty chairs illuminated on a stage for several minutes; a curtain opens to expose the chairs then eventually closes. The audience is expected to imagine an experience, to essentially strip the mind and to "see something hidden in humans."[59]

Like Ono, Tanaka (practicing in Japan in the 1950s) was also greatly interested in mental processes, and, similarly, her performance work was initially viewed as feminist on the basis that the performer was female. Tanaka denied these claims, stating, for example, that *Electric Dress*, her best-known work, was about "the extraordinary beauty that cannot be created by human hands," literally illuminating the beauty of light through her movements, rather than highlighting her body, femininity, or gender in any way.[60] Just like with Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, the artist performing with her own body in a non-sexualized manner was considered, at the time, highly original and radical, but only acceptably so if it was interpreted within a feminist framework. Ono and Tanaka both dealt with material and actions as mediums with which to engage the mind, and have both been equally misunderstood through Western frameworks.

Fig. 5: Atsuko Tanaka, *Electric Dress*, 1956. Photo: Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art.

Likewise, the work of artist collective Hi-Red Center (henceforth referred to as HRC) has been largely misinterpreted because of social and political differences between the East and West. HRC's *Shelter Plan* was first performed at the Tokyo Imperial Hotel in January of 1964. The event, taking place over two days, consisted of members of HRC inviting participants to be weighed and measured, and eventually offered a custom-made, single-

[59] Yoshimoto, 101.

[60] Yoshimoto, 22; Tiampo, 34.

person bomb shelter.[61] As Taro Nettleton notes, *Shelter Plan* is often cited as one of the collective's most important works, yet it is almost never explained *why*. While *Shelter Plan* (presented later as *Hotel Event* in New York) works on a performative level, exploring the body and documentary techniques in terms of a Western avant-garde framework, the work is most important in how it resonated with themes of war, trauma, and surveillance in post-war Japan.[62] Yoko Ono participated in the 1964 staging of the event, likely in part because HRC was also associated with Fluxus.[63] Like Ono, HRC performed actively in both Tokyo and New York, yet unlike Ono, HRC is today primarily understood mainly in the context of Japanese art history—not a Western or even, really, a global one. While it is clear that HRC dealt very explicitly with ideas pertaining to Japanese politics and society, Ono has made it clear that her artworks are also heavily influenced by Japanese culture and history—thus it seems that her associations with Western artists and movements are what serve to legitimize her presence in the modernist canon, which is apparently based on a Western narrative.

PAINTING TO BE STEPPED ON is perhaps a perfect example of the cultural hybridity inherent to her work. Instructions for this piece read "Leave a piece of canvas or finished painting on the floor or in the street." The work has been interpreted in a Western sense by further pushing the notions established by Marcel Dumas' readymades regarding the preciousness of the work of art: anything is a work of art if the artist says it is, and thus a raw piece of canvas on the floor becomes a painting to be stepped on.[64] Ono's writings and interviews make clear that she was very aware of how she was attempting to fit into a Western narrative of art, continuing in the path of established traditions in order to forge new ones; subsequently, her ideas of regarding the further demolition of the barriers between art and life became an important Fluxus motif. However, Munroe also brings *PAINTING TO BE STEPPED ON* into dialogue with the history of Christianity in Edo-period Japan. As Christians were being prosecuted throughout rural Japan, their faith was tested as icons of Mary or Christ were laid at their feet, and they were asked to walk on them. The process, *Fumi-e*, translates literally into "painting to be stepped on," and the artwork functions effectively in a conceptual sense and for different reasons in both Eastern and Western narratives.[65]

New Narratives

It is this inability to define Ono's narrative—the one place her work is most meaningful in our understanding of modern and contemporary art—from one point of view that has led to her marginalization as an artist, and continues to impact how her work is understood and received. Indeed, her more recent works, such as her *IMAGINE PEACE TOWER,* emphasize her life with John Lennon in the media; a period of time that was arguably more harmful than helpful to Ono's career. Yet it must also be acknowledged that to many, Ono is primarily known through her marriage to this even more famous figure. As it is apparent that Ono was underappreciated among art media and institutions while she was most

[61] Miriam Sas, "Intermedia: 1955-1970," in *Tokyo Avant-Garde*, 150.
[62] Taro Nettleton, "Hi Red Center's Shelter Plan (1964): The Uncanny Body in the Imperial Hotel." *Japanese Studies*, 24 Feb. 2014. DOI: 10.1080/10371397.2014.886507: 3.
[63] Ibid; 1, 6.
[64] Jon Hendricks, "Yoko Ono and Fluxus," in *YES Yoko Ono*, 39.
[65] Alexandra Munroe, "Why War? Yoko by Yoko at the Serpentine," in *Yoko Ono: To the Light*, 10.

active in the 1960s and '70s, one must wonder if she would be as discussed as she is today were it not for the media controversy surrounding her life with Lennon.

It seems, then, that in order to truly de-stabilize the Westernized canonization of art history, it is a necessity to constantly question and re-evaluate all given interpretations of an artist or a work of art. Karen-Edis Barzman notes that "within their own discourse, most feminist art historians unwittingly replicate discursive strategies inherited from the dominant art histories—in particular, the "master-reading," by means of which they assert the correctness or truthfulness of their interpretations," and that art historians "who cast their interpretive work in the form of a master-reading are perpetuating the same reader-text relations as those who contribute to the dominant art histories."[66] Replace "feminism," with almost any method and the same could still be argued: the only viable manner in which to learn from art historical practices is to constantly question and re-evaluate master-narratives and theories in an effort to de-stabilize them: asserting one's own interpretation as *the* correct manner in which to understand the work is to miss the point entirely.

And it is perhaps just this that Ono's work seeks to express at its core; that all experience is subjective, that the same instructions can be interpreted differently, and that each experience is equally valid. It is only in the last decade or so that Ono's work has begun to be understood on its own terms. Though it has taken years, Ono's work can finally be understood as many things, dealing with many ideas, themes, movements, and contexts; thus the process of re-evaluating her work has already begun. By combing through Ono's biography, her own cited sources, and the context in which she was practicing, we can examine and re-examine her work to find new and relevant interpretations, and de-stabilize the notion of just one Western or Eastern source to her works. Most importantly, by re-claiming the Japanese heritage present in Ono's work that has presently been established as relevant and authentic in itself, we can help re-assert the authenticity of the Japanese avant-garde and protect it from claims of being derivative. As Ono's work can be authentic and deal with themes present in both Western art *and* Japanese society, so too can artists who are spatially practicing in the so-called periphery. It is thus fitting that the work of an artist who uses her work to strive for world peace, and peace of mind, can be used to re-claim authenticity and agency lost to the homogenizing processes of history. As Ono writes, "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 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, but that is your problem."[67]

[66] Karen-Edis Barzman, "Beyond the Can: Feminists, Postmodernism, and the History of Art." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 53, No.3 (Summer 1994): 331.
[67] Ono, "To the Wesleyan People," in *Grapefruit*, unpaginated.

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