Multimedia artist and performer Yoko Ono was born into an aristocratic family in Tokyo, Japan in 1933 and began her artistic pursuits in New York city. She collaborated on art, film and musical projects with her husband, John Lennon of the Beatles until 1980, when he was shot by a deranged fan. She has, however, continued her art career and honoured Lennon’s memory, initiating the LennonOno Grant for Peace award in 2002.

Ono experienced a strained relationship with her mother who held resentment for her 3 children, feeling they were a burden on her upper-class life in Tokyo. Despite her family’s wealth, Ono endured an isolated childhood as she was neglected by her parents who were too busy to show affection. Nonetheless, her creativity and musicality provided her with the comfort she needed which ultimately became her career in life.

“Art is a way of survival.” – Yoko Ono


Her art often demands the viewers’ participation, forcing them to get involved. For example, in her artworks “Cut Piece, 1964”, “Cloud Piece, 1964” and “Painting to Hammer a Nail, 1961”, she involves the audience in order to complete the work.
Artist’s Practice

Yoko Ono rejected the idea that art must be a material object where many of her works consist merely of instructions; promoting creative thinking.

“You may think I’m small but I have a universe inside my mind.” – Yoko Ono


From the beginning of her artistic career, Ono refused contemporary art conventions by exploring the power of the concept in order to convey aesthetic and philosophical meaning. Her works are designed to bring audiences’ attention to IDEAS, rather than appearances. Ono valued her independence as an artist and is described as a ‘path breaking force’ who eliminated boundaries among the arts.

Yoko Ono’s experiences, events and performances form the backbone of her artistic practice and hence, she is the archetypal conceptual artist. Her familiarity with both the traditions of music and art captivated the western musicians, La Monte Young and John Cage, who she, in turn, was influenced by them. Ono’s exposure and participation in the cultures of both the United States and Japan influenced her relationships with artistic production.

In addition, the “Happenings” movement is a staged art event that requires active participation from the audience in order for the artwork to come to ‘full fruition’. It is a relatively new form of artistic media which greatly influenced Ono’s works. For example, many of her performance pieces including “Cut Piece” and “Painting to Hammer a Nail” necessitated the audiences' involvement for the completion of the work. Along with this, “Dadaism”, an artistic and literary movement which emerged in 1961 in reaction to World War 1, also played a role in Ono’s practice.

"She was the first artist, in 1964, to put language on the wall of the gallery and invite the viewer to complete the work.” – Alexandra Munroe

https://www.theguardian.com/global/2012/jun/08/yoko-ono-retrospective-serpentine-conceptual
John Cage, a composer and a conceptual artist who incorporated chance, silence and environmental effects into his performances, was also an influence on Yoko Ono’s artistic production, as was she, on his art. Cage believed that one should embark on a piece without having an idea of the eventual end. This is seen in Ono’s “Cut Piece” where the process of the creation of the performance work was much more significant than the finished product. Along with this, her instructional piece “Painting to Hammer a Nail - 1961” followed the idea that the work would be completed by the audience. This is similar to Cage’s experimental “Four Minutes, Thirty-three seconds – 1952” in which the ambient noises in the room, provided by the audience throughout that small period of time are considered the work. Hence, the similarities between the works of the two artist’s portray their influences upon one another.

Ono was a founding member of the Fluxus, a group of artists whose goal was to destroy any boundary between art and life and who did not agree with the authority of museums to determine the value of art. Her involvement in this art movement also had an immense influence on the way she presented her works of art. For example, Ono’s ‘Cut piece’ breaks down the distinctions between art and life as the performance engages with her body.

In the 1960’s, Ono opened her home to dancers, composers and artists encouraging them to work together. These events in her home allowed Fluxus artists and Avant-garde musicians to gather and work together on a regular basis. Her building of the interdisciplinary community acts as a fundamental aspect of her practice.

Her performances and instructional paintings of the 1960’s everlastingly transformed the relationship between artist and audience, inspiring future generations of artists to use visual art as a political platform. For example, her famous “Cut Piece, 1964” calls attention to the vulnerability and resilience of the female body. Ono advised future female performance artists such as Valie Export, Hannah Wilke and Marina Abromovic to take even greater risks.
Ono’s Intentions

Many of Yoko Ono’s performances were instructional pieces and thus, audience focused. Her intentions with various performances are similar while being discrete in their own way. However, many of her works explore themes of race, gender, class, tradition as well as universal messages of peace through the use of audience interaction and participation within her performances.

Ono’s “Bag Piece – 1964” instructed 2 individuals to enter a large black bag, an environment of complete darkness, and remove their clothes. It was their choice to decide what to do while inside the bag. After a few minutes, they were asked to put their clothes back on and exit the bag. In this work, Ono’s intent was to create a situation that diminished the power of race, gender, class or any other traditional differences while for the two inside the bag, these distinctions were determined by vulnerability and blindness. The audience were also unable to draw any conclusions based on categories to separate the two as the figures could be anyone. Here, Ono aims to convey how although there are and will always be differences between individuals, this should not stop them from interactions between one another. Whether it is gender, class, race, religion or status.

In addition, like other major works of Ono, her “Wish Tree – 1996” heavily relies on audience interaction where she provides the idea, circumstance and materials then steps aside to allow the work to unfold through audience participation. Her “Wish Tree” exists in a range of contexts and countries around the world. Ono asks audience members to write down wishes on cards and hang them on a tree in a museum. The museum staff then gathers the wishes and returns them to Ono, who buries them at the base of her Imagine Peace Tower in Rijkavik, Iceland. According to Ono, her inspiration for this piece stemmed from her childhood memory of writing wishes on small pieces of paper she hung from flowering branches in a temple garden.
The ceremonial display coupled with the subsequent burial of wishes from all over the world powerfully spreads Ono’s universal message of peace.
Cut Piece - 1964

Cut Piece, initially performed by Yoko Ono in Yamaichi Concert Hall, Kyoto was among the first examples of performance art, one of the artist's best known works. Ono sat motionless on stage, wearing her best suit of clothing, with a pair of scissors placed in front of her. Members of the audience were invited to approach the stage, one at a time, to cut off a piece of her clothing to take with them. Ono remained still and silent while her clothing gradually fell away from her body until she was only down to her underwear. Themes of materialism, gender, class and cultural identity are central to this work.

According to the artist, her original intention was to Harness the Buddhist mentality. Buddha, who was born as a wealthy prince, achieved enlightenment by up his worldly desires whilst sitting under a tree for 7 years. However, this intention was coupled with a feminine underlying theme that ‘women too often need to give up everything’. The performance was a demonstration of this reality. Along with this, it was one of the first pieces to address sexual violence in public.

The work is a key piece in the Fluxus movement due to the way it engages with the artist's body but also as it breaks down the differences between art and life. It challenges the neutrality between the viewer and the art object, Ono herself.
Critiques of Ono’s “Cut Piece”

Art and Feminism expresses that “Cut Piece examines the role the female body has played in art throughout the ages. The work demonstrates how viewing without responsibility has the potential to harm or even destroy the object of perception – the artist.” This is seen as with each piece of fabric being cut away, Ono’s facial expression started to become one of vulnerability and misery. Along with this, it is stated that her work “challenges the neutrality of the relationship between the viewer and art object as Ono presented a situation in which the viewer was exposed in the aggressive act of unveiling the female body.”

The critic Michael Bracewell notes that "It is amazing how well that piece has lasted. When you see film of the piece done originally, she seems so vulnerable as a young woman, especially a young Asian woman. There are extraordinary undertones – submissiveness, the idea of the geisha. Enacted, it becomes incredibly tense." For Munroe, Cut Piece was "absolutely revolutionary". He states "The idea that the artist's body in time and space is itself a work of art was totally radical."

Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz's opinion on the work states that “Yoko Ono’s “Cut Piece” embodies an intriguing yet depressing look into the human nature and how we behave with someone else's life and dignity in our own hands.” They express “'Cut Piece' critically questions the natural boundaries that we put up on a daily basis. What is the basis of clothes? Is clothes a necessary protection of our bodies? Are we comfortable allowing any stranger to act upon our bodies and allowing ourselves to act upon the bodies of others?"

Ultimately, it is said that “Cut Piece” is an exploration of trust and faith in the human spirit.
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