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Into the Looking Glass

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**Recommended Citation**

Yoko Ono's retrospective, _Yes Yoko Ono_, now at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, featured an array of the artist's work—including sculpture, photography, painting, film, word scores, and ephemera—from the late 1950s to the present. One element that unites Ono's oeuvre is the sense of _unfinishedness_. This is intentional. Early in her career, Ono devised a name for her strategy, calling it the "instructure." Based loosely on John Cage's instructional approach to musical composition, the instructure is "something that emerged from instruction and yet not quite emerged—not quite structured—never quite structured...like an unfinished church with a sky ceiling." The instructure demands that the interpreter fill in its structural void with imagination, thus emphasizing mind-work more than Cagian indeterminacy. This aspect is readily apparent in _Ono's Painting to Be Constructed in Your Head_ (1962). The instruction reads: "Observe three paintings carefully. Mix them well in your head."

Many of Ono's instructures play with our understanding of the image by making the viewer an integral element in the completion of the work.

_A Poem in Three Stanzas_ (1967) suggests that the photograph help bring an object to its appropriate viewing distance. Yet each tool has no distinct identity in itself, existing only in relation to a viewer. This becomes clear in the last phrase, "to be blown up photographically, until it becomes readable." For Ono, visual art unfolds in the viewer's imagination, yet images must also enter the social realm to become "matter." Ono writes that "conceptual reality, as it were, becomes a concrete matter only when one destroys its conceptuality by asking others to enact it, as, otherwise, it cannot escape from staying imaginary."

Ono's _Instructions for Photographs_ (1961-71) are short word exercises that demonstrate the way images are actively created. These short instructions gnaw away at the illusion of the image as an objective, isolated entity and, hence, empower the viewer to see through the phantom images that haunt the contemporary landscape. By highlighting the physical and mental labor that we each invest in images, Ono reveals the way we both make and unmake photographs. Only when we forget this do images seem to make us.

_A Poem in Three Stanzas_ (1967) suggests that the magnifying glass, the microscope, and the photograph help bring an object to its appropriate viewing distance. Yet each tool has no distinct identity in itself, existing only in relation to a viewer. This becomes clear in the last phrase, "to be blown up photographically, until it becomes readable." For Ono, visual art unfolds in the viewer's imagination, yet images must also enter the social realm to become "matter." Ono writes that "conceptual reality, as it were, becomes a concrete matter only when one destroys its conceptuality by asking others to enact it, as, otherwise, it cannot escape from staying imaginary."

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The point is to set up a situation where you simulate what you are doing in life, and make people observe it at the same time, like you observe your face in the mirror.

—Yoko Ono

This destruction of "the image" makes possible a new understanding of the relationship between "the viewer" and "the viewed." The two are, for Ono, intertwined. A good example of this is her well-loved Ceiling Painting (1966). Unfortunately, the restrictions of the current exhibition diminish the resonance of this work by preventing viewer interaction. But we can imagine. The ladder is intended to be mounted, whereby the traveler's journey is rewarded with a card inscribed with the word "yes," hanging within arm's reach of the ladder's top rung. A magnifying glass attached to the frame can be grasped and held aloft in order to read the minute text. These simple acts remind the viewer that her desire carries her to this moment of affirmation. And what is found at journey's end? What is anticipated is discovered, for what is revealed in the text is less a secret at the work's conclusion than a confirmation of the quest itself. "Yes... you are, you will, you can, you already have." In Ceiling Painting, Ono directly interrogates the alliance between viewer and lens. Although the lens brings the outside world closer to the human eye, the viewer's mind also casts itself out and forward toward its future. By recording light's constellation, the photograph suspends time, enabling nostalgic rumination. But light's journey is not actually captured in the photograph—it turns, momentarily, to reflect upon itself, not unlike the shiver one feels at the top of Ono's ladder.

Because light is temporal, the photograph is not still; it is always reflecting on its past and projecting forth toward its future. Ono exploits photography's temporal dimension in Film No. 5 (Smile) (1968)—a 51-minute film depicting John Lennon in a garden. This film was created "in the spirit of home movies... we were mainly concerned about the vibrations the film sends out—the kind that were between [John and myself]." The viewer, standing in for Ono, receives the "vibrations" sent from one lover to another. This uncanny tone is heightened by the fact that Ono prolongs Lennon's smile, accentuating the slow transformation of his lips by filming the scene at 333 frames per second while screening it at the standard 24. Ultimately, Film No. 5 casts itself out toward a future viewer by exploiting film's projective dimension. At the same time, it is not necessary that the film be seen for it to have an impact. Ono states that "regarding Film No. 5, even if it weren't shown, even if you haven't seen the film, it is affecting you." In this sense, then, the film's optimal moment of viewing is a temporal arc that is initiated by the work itself.

At Yes Yoko Ono, the viewer can survey Ono ephemera, such as the invitation to her exhibit This Is Not Here (1971), at the Everson Gallery in Syracuse, New York. The invitation was printed on a sheet of photographic paper that was partially fixed and then folded. Once the invitation was opened and exposed to the light, the photographically printed information faded, leaving only Ono's name and a telephone number on the reverse side. Thus, the viewer is left looking at blank sheet of paper and an afterimage of its contents. This piece photographically plays upon the fact that "invitations" are transitory extensions from one being to another. Grasping after permanency ultimately fails.

Although the photograph is a tool with which to picture our world, ruminate on the past, and project our hopes, it too exists in time. The photograph is a crystallized speck of time, which, like all things, exists in time. When looking at a photograph, the viewer dips into this temporal current in an instant of existential recognition; this is a confrontation with what Ono calls "wonderment." In the process of completing Ono's instructions, the common understanding of the photograph as an eternal imprint of time is shattered so that the complex process of viewing might be experienced.

**Notes**

1. Yoko Ono, On Instructions, Yes Yoko Ono (Japan Society and Harry Abrams, 2001), 284.
4. Yoko Ono, Yes Yoko Ono, 214.

Yes Yoko Ono originated at the Japan Society Gallery, New York. For more information and updated tour information, visit http://www.moca.com.org.

Dore Bowen is a visual theorist currently teaching at the California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco. She is completing her dissertation, The Moment of Visual Phenomenology and Post-War Photography, at the University of Rochester.

Yoko Ono Portrait by Iain Macmillan. © Yoko Ono, Courtesy Lennon Photo Archive, New York.