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Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971
Reviewed by Midori Yamamura

In 1971, Yoko Ono (b. 1933) staged an unsanctioned exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) entitled “One Woman Show,” an imaginary show advertised in two newspapers. “More than forty years later,” writes Glenn D. Lowry, the Museum’s Director, “we are proud to have worked closely with the artist to present “Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971” (6). The present volume is the catalogue to her official one-woman exhibition at the very establishment she critiqued long ago. Her goal for the original show, entitled “Museum Of Modern (F)art,” was to transform people’s fundamental way of thinking, based on her experience of being a woman in a patriarchal society. The challenge for the catalogue, as I see it, was how to make Ono’s singular vision accessible to the public.

Comprising three thematic essays—on Ono’s persona, her early works in New York, and her 1971 MoMA intervention, respectively—and five texts detailing her activities in New York, Tokyo, and London, the catalogue focuses on the period from 1960 to 1971, when Ono broke artistic ground by amalgamating music, conceptual art, painting, sculptures, and performance—what today is known as “intermedia.” Toward the seventies, as the Vietnam War intensified, she invented a political art from her unique place, foreshadowing the feminist art of the 1970s. The volume’s 126 illustrations include a variety of previously inaccessible archival materials: the original typescript for Ono’s earliest stage performance, A Grapefruit in the World of Park (1955/c.1961; Fig. 1); two programs from her earliest contribution to the New York scene, the Chambers Street Loft Series (1960-61); selected press clippings; and photo documentation. These records are helpful when reconstructing Ono’s ephemeral art. They also make us aware that, with the exception of one instance in Japan, most reviews were sympathetic to her work. Both The New York Times and The Village Voice, for example, paid serious attention to her first solo recital (1961). The brochures for her concerts further reveal such impressive array of avant-garde artists as John Cage, David Tudor, La Monte Young (13), George Brecht, and Yvonne Rainer (69) in the United States, and in Japan Genpei Akasegawa, Toshi Ichiyanagi, Tatsumi Hijikata, and Yasunao Tone (85), who participated in Ono’s three early concerts, evidencing how seriously Ono was received by the vanguard communities in the international art scenes. Her impeccable records make us wonder why the MoMA is only now giving a solo exhibition to such a respected woman artist.

The reason for this long delay can be surmised from “Absence and Presence in Yoko Ono’s Work,” an essay by Klaus Biesenbach, the exhibition’s co-curator. Biesenbach observes that Ono is not always present at her performances. Her instruction pieces—codes of musical compositions that proposed mental and/or physical actions to be carried out by the reader/performer—for example, paid serious attention to her first solo recital (1961). The persona functioned like her “mask” (33), which Biesenbach saw as an alternate form of “presence.” Her access to the media was enhanced by her marriage to John Lennon in 1969, and today, Ono is the most publicly visible experimental artist from the 1960s (she has 4.72 million Twitter followers). It may have been her popularity that caused the MoMA not to take her works seriously.

She was also not alone in “working within arenas of Conceptualism that sought to move art beyond the walls of...
the institution by turning to advertising, fake or inaccessible exhibitions, and signage worn on the body” (24), writes Julia Bryan-Wilson in her essay, “For Posterity: Yoko Ono,” in which she informatively places Ono’s “Museum Of Modern (F)art” within the context of its time. “Far from merely iterating her own ethos” (24), Ono’s work employed strategies similar to those that emerged in works by Dan Graham, Adrian Piper, Robert Barry, and Daniel Buren—some even earlier than 1971. Others such as Henry Flynt and Jack Smith had even picketed the MoMA, critiquing the “institution’s policies and ideologies” (24). Ono’s interest in low bodily functions during this time—such as flatulence—can equally be linked to George Maciunas’s scatological design and “feminist practices of around the same time” (25). Citing Joan Kee’s writing, one thing Bryan-Wilson avoids in her essay is “the emphasis on the individual,” as purportedly, such emphasis “for women artists from Asia who exhibited in the US and Europe” would result “in the subordination of the work to a host of other concerns” (29).

And this is where, as a feminist, my question arises. Since the 1990s, such feminist scholars as Griselda Pollock have been struggling to find the significance of “difference” in women’s art practice. And in 1966, Ono had already dissociated herself from the history of Conceptualism by describing her instruction pieces as “Con Art.” Her art, most importantly, “asks us to reorientate ourselves physically and mentally,” was how the curator Joan Rothfuss observed Ono’s work in 2000. This is because Ono matured as an artist when attitudes toward gender and race were radically changing in the post-WWII world, and she wanted to shift people’s perception of the world as she saw it differently.

Born in 1933 in Tokyo, Ono was part of the first generation of women admitted to Japanese universities after the New Constitution took effect in 1947. She moved to New York in 1953, when underrepresented women and émigré artists were converging on downtown Manhattan and launching their careers from artist-run cooperative galleries. Galvanized by the democratic spirit, at a time when “nobody is going to really give me a concert, no producer is never [going to] give me a show or a gallery show,” Ono thought of renting a loft at 112 Chambers Street. This became the historic Chambers Street Loft Series. Still, the sources excluded from this catalogue attest to the fact that Ono was marginalized even at her own loft, due to her gender and ethnicity. Being unable to perform a program of her own, Ono imaginatively began using the loft walls. These became her “Instruction Paintings.” Indeed, her Add Color Painting (1961) is captured in the background of an unidentifiable loft performance photograph (50), which the show’s co-curator, Christophe Cherix, compared with Robert Rauschenberg’s White Paintings (1951).

In “Yoko Ono’s Lightning Years,” Cherix saw that both Ono’s and Rauschenberg’s works required the “process of interaction and change triggered by their display” (17). But Ono might have felt herself more aligned with the Gutai artist Yoshihara Jiro’s Please Draw Freely (1956), which stimulated the participants’ creativity, since Ono was against chance operation. Based on Ono’s letter to Jon Hendricks, documented in this volume, her classical text, “Words of a Fabricator” (1962), was really a critique of John Cage’s chance operation. She instead advocated, “sounds by intention” (116). Ono’s support for intention from this period is representative of post-WWII artists who dared being reincorporated into a totalitarian society. After the war, even Surrealists sought for “intentions” in Japan. But Cherix, like Bryan-Wilson, considers Ono’s early works in New York without paying attention to Ono’s Japanese upbringing. Among the writings in this catalogue, only Midori Yoshimoto’s text on Ono’s activities in Japan (1962-64) brings in Japanese context and discusses Ono’s frictions with Japan’s patriarchal society (80). Aside from Yoshimoto, the catalogue tries to align Ono with other artists of significant achievement. However, if we are truly in the post-feminist phase, rather than judging Ono in relation to established history, doesn’t the MoMA need to develop a different set of values to represent her? A hint of that can be found in Ono’s own feminist statement, “The Feminization Of Our Society” (1971). In it, she wrote: “the ultimate goal of female liberation is” to liberate ourselves from “paternal influence in this society.” For that, women should not be “apologetic for being real ... for farting ... for making love and smelling like a human being” (217).

If the current volume accepted more of her pains, struggles, and excitements as a person, then we probably no longer need “to play” what Ono describes as “the same game that men have played for centuries” (218). Still, the catalogue is a good starting point for discussions regarding that change. ●

Midori Yamamura is a Lecturer in Art History at Fordham University, and author of Yoyoi Kusama, Inventing the Singular (MIT Press, 2015).

Notes
5. In one instance, Ono remembered that La Monte Young (although she merely addressed him as a person who lived on Bank Street) once introduced her to the reporters as a “chick who owns this loft” that “I was not seriously taken as an artist because I was a woman.” Ono, “The Yoko Ono Interview” (1970), cited in Midori Yoshimoto, Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 86. Young considered himself as Director of the Series. See La Monte Young, “La Monte Young Experience,” in La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela (New York: self-published, c. 1972), n.p.
Sonia Delaunay
Edited by Anne Montfort, with contributions by Jean-Claude Marcadé et al.
Paris Museés & Tate Enterprises, 2014
Reviewed by Jan Garden Castro

The Tate Modern catalogue and exhibition is a visual tour de force, with over 250 mostly full-color illustrations that highlight Sonia Delaunay’s artistic range working in diverse media, materials, and processes as well as her leadership and participation in new arts movements, including Orphism, Simultané, Abstraction-Création, and Nouvelles Réalités. Its scope is larger than the 2011 fabric and fashion-oriented Sonia Delaunay: Color Moves catalogue and exhibition at the Smithsonian, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. The Tate Modern catalogue, a collaboration with Musée d’Art Moderne, Paris (where the exhibition originated), offers fourteen short essays by leading and younger Delaunay scholars, primarily from France, with one from England and two from the United States. An excellent chronology for each decade is interspersed between the essays to present the timeline of Sonia Delaunay’s life (1885 Ukraine – 1979 Paris) and main artistic achievements. Instead of a grounded narrative overview and analysis of Delaunay’s body of work in relation to her century (and our own), the chronology, images, and essays spotlight key artistic achievements.

Céline Chicha-Castex and Brigitte Leal open by summarizing the huge, important donations of art and documents by Sonia and Charles Delaunay, her son, to the National Museums of France in 1963 and 1977. The primary written materials include masses of letters, and over thirty years of Sonia’s journal entries, most stored at the Bibliothèque nationale. One sign of Delaunay’s international stature are these primary materials along with others at institutions in France, Germany, United States, Russia, Portugal, and Spain.

The first essays, “In St. Petersburg” by Jean-Claude Marcadé and “Being Russian in Paris” by Sherry Buckberrough, touch on Sergei Diaghilev’s Mir Iskusstva (World of Art) magazine as an important part of the young artist’s formative influences, and on the Ukrainian and Russian needlework and craft traditions that it re-popularized. Neither mentions that the artist’s family had its own seamstress, and that costume parties were part of her youth. Importantly, the Hermitage Museum, near her home, offered an optimal view of great international art. Marcadé discusses that few documents survive in relation to Sara Stern Terk’s Ukrainian birth heritage and the Jewish intelligentsia culture in which she was raised in St. Petersburg, after age five, by her aunt and uncle Terk. Marcadé notes that after she moved to Paris, the artist did not frequent Jewish circles, considered herself a ‘Russian Ukrainian,’ and celebrated the Orthodox Christian Easter “culturally rather than religiously” (19). Buckberrough’s essay argues that Delaunay was consciously androgynous because she may have met with Valentine de St-Point in Paris in 1914, because Natalia Goncharova painted hieroglyphs on her bare breasts in Moscow the same year, and because she “wears a man’s working jacket ... personalized by her patchwork” in one 1914 photo (47–48). In my opinion, Buckberrough neither defines androgyny nor provides sufficient evidence that it applies here. Delaunay was not consciously choosing to adopt a male/female persona, and the word androgynous is being retro-imposed. She was functioning simultaneously as a wife, mother, artist, and income-producing just as many of my (baby boomer) generation experienced this same requirement without necessarily self-identifying as androgynous.

Brigitte Leal discusses the important ‘Fauve’ works the artist created after her studies with Ludwig Schmid-Reutte in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1904, her studies with Rudolf Grossmann in Paris in 1907, and her introduction to the art of Braque, Picasso, Derain, Dufy, Metzinger, Pascin, and her future husband, Robert Delaunay (they married in 1910). First, though, in 1908, Sonia married German gallery owner Wilhelm Uhde (a marriage of convenience to an openly gay friend) rather than return to St. Petersburg as her relatives urged. Leal’s short essay centers on the post-Cézanne context for Nu jaune (Yellow nude, 1908), “in which colour prevails over form, and narrative over iconicity,” and which, along with work by (Czech painter) Frantisek Kupka, marked the simultaneous arrival in the work of both the Czech and the Russian artist of an art of colour which would dominate the century in all its dimensions—expressive, psychological, physiological and musical—and of which they shared equal status as the undisputed pioneers (40).

To a remarkable degree, Delaunay’s inventions were ahead of her time. Pascal Rousseau’s essay, “Voyelles: Sonia Delaunay and the universal language of colour hearing,” first quotes Apollinaire’s close-up view as the guest of Sonia and Robert, “As they wake up, the Delaunays speak painting” (71). Rousseau emphasizes that the artist’s pioneering use of color had an international impact, in part, because Sonia grew up with German, English, and French governesses, and she, Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, and others in her circle were polyglots, fluent in...