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## The Widow Peaks

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There comes a moment during the concert when Yoko Ono throws the audience an appraising look over her jumbo blue rimless glasses. She's a woman of 67 -- hard to believe as she strips off a tailored jacket to reveal arms absent of extra flesh and thighs wrapped in tight denim. This is not her crowd. It's not even a crowd that belongs to DJ Spooky or Thurston Moore, Sonic Youth's Pied Piper of experimental rock, up there on stage to give her context. A frumpled dot-com type is reaching for his P.D.A. and muttering, "I don't think I've ever met a Yoko Ono fan." They've come for Stereolab, which is next on the jazz festival bill at Battery Park this summer night.

So Yoko takes one look and then she goes for it: the scream, the big one, the yaayaayaah ululating primal scream that wrings her body. DJ Spooky turns that big head of his in its knitted hood and starts paying more attention to her than to his keyboard. She's a madwoman up there, gasping and keening, "Listen to your heartbeat!" She's screaming the way she imagined screaming for a composition she conceived in 1961, when she was hosting avant-garde events in her Chambers Street loft and improvising new art forms. She wrote it down, titled it "Voice Piece for Soprano" and later published it in her book "Grapefruit": "Scream. /1. against the wind / 2. against the wall / 3. against the sky."

The world may be better acquainted with Yoko Ono the pop personality than Yoko Ono the artist, but she doesn't make such distinctions. Music/art, avant-garde/mass market, noh shriek/rock beat -- it's all just one more way of saying it. "I fall in love with a concept and I use it in many ways," she says

later. "I made a record called 'Fly,' and a film called 'Fly' and a billboard called 'Fly.' The concept is the key."

However irresistible the concepts and wordplay may be to members of the art-infused underground like Thurston Moore, who set "Voice Piece" to music on his own CD, they haven't endeared Ono to a world reared on rock. At Battery Park the applause registers just above polite.

Backstage, Sean Ono Lennon is hanging out amid the gamy garbage cans. Often it's him with his girlfriend, Yuka Honda, and her group Cibo Matto up there onstage with his mother. "I think what makes her unique as an artist," Lennon says, "is she really just thinks of art as this total thing that encompasses film, theater, performance, music, visual art and everything else. Well, they're expressions, they're manifestations of your inner, you know, workings."

DJ Spooky sheds his hood and becomes the mild-mannered aesthetic theoretician Paul D. Miller, in cleanshaven head and khakis. "Yoko's coming out of a hybrid Western and Eastern sense of postmysticism," he says. "She's a shaman. Shamans were transcendent figures who could guide you on an experience. That's how I view her. Like Joseph Beuys," he says, likening her to one of the central figures of postwar European art.

It is a startling claim, but this is the moment to make it. John Lennon once called Yoko Ono the world's "most famous unknown artist." But this fall, at last, she gets the full museum-retrospective treatment plus the kind of scholarly catalog essential to recasting an artistic reputation.

"Yes Yoko Ono" opens at the Japan Society Gallery on Oct. 18 before traveling for two years. The retrospective posits her as a pioneering performance and conceptual artist, and there are other Manhattan events to bolster the argument: a week of her films at the Whitney Museum and a new installation and old film stills at Ubu Gallery.

As usual, Ono will be juggling her season with her more famous role as wife and widow. It's the 20th anniversary of John Lennon's death. He would have turned 60 on Oct. 9. That day she'll be at the opening of the John Lennon museum in Tokyo, and soon after she'll be on hand to open a Lennon exhibition at the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. She has also been enmeshed in releasing "The Beatles Anthology" as a book and reissuing two Lennon-Ono albums.

The timing of competing Ono-Lennon celebrations may seem weird, but actually it makes a point. However trailblazing her art-making activities, in the end they were finger exercises for her most improbable achievement: how she and Lennon together used the techniques of the avant-garde to turn their celebrity into art.

A few days after the concert I leave my shoes at the door and sink my toes into Yoko Ono's white carpeting, passing a covey of glassy-eyed bronze cats that she has cast, passing John Lennon's portrait "Mona Yoko" over the entrance fireplace and Andy Warhol's portrait of John Lennon over the dining-room mantel, until I reach the apartment-size kitchen where her life takes place. For friends, there's the comfortable clutter of the corner with an ivory-colored sofa, plug-in foot massager and messages from Sean stuck into a mirror frame studded with silver pineapples. For more serious business, there's the vast mosaic kitchen table, where Eiji, her Madison Avenue hairdresser, did her spiky, asymmetrical cut before the concert.

It's one of the incongruities she lives by: uptown privilege, downtown proclivities. Early on she rebelled against her long family line of Japanese aristocrats and bankers -- her father ran the Bank of Tokyo in New York -- though she's successfully managed the multi-hundred-million dollar Lennon estate with their genes. She found herself as an artist in the late 1950's, in a \$50.50-a-month loft in lower Manhattan furnished with orange crates, and her friends Nam June Paik, from the old days, and David Byrne and Kiki Smith, from the new, live down there too. Now Sean's a part of the downtown New York music community, and he helps make a place for her among the new avant-garde. This younger generation gets her music, knows her art; she's home.

Still, she is something of an anomaly, arriving as she does at, say, Tonic, the homeroom of experimental sound on the Lower East Side, in a Jaguar. "It's a complex thing to be Yoko," says Sam Havadtoy, her companion of almost 20 years. As Ono leads me to the kitchen island and seats herself with her back to the view of gargoyles and rooftops, she says, "I have to tell you a story," and begins a tale of a Japanese lord and an "incredibly important" painting master that could be out of her own family history. Her maternal grandfather, Zenjiro Yasuda, was founder of the Yasuda Bank and eventually amassed a fortune. When he met her grandmother, however, he was a poor boy from the provinces. Ono relishes the parallels to her own life -- the working-class boy from Liverpool who became great and the aristocratic Japanese girl he wed. And John, she says, always thought he resembled her grandfather. "I told John, 'Don't wish for it, because my grandfather was assassinated,'" she says. "Isn't that amazing?"

On and off for Ono's first seven years, her family spent short periods in America, enough to make her an outsider at home, a foreigner who "smelled of butter." From childhood she was trained in classical piano and voice, and she went to school with Emperor Akihito. By the early 1950's, she and her family were living in Scarsdale, N.Y. There she was an outsider again, labeled a "chink," and estranged within the family.

In an adolescent depression that brought on earaches so severe that she lay in a darkened room wearing sanitary pads like earmuffs to block out sound, she made her first artworks. She lit a match and watched it burn. Then another. Eventually she wrote down the phases of this evanescent ritual. In 1955, after she enrolled at Sarah Lawrence College, met and married the Japanese composer Toshi Ichihyanagi (now one of the leading electronic composers in Japan) and encountered the downtown New York art scene, she began to perform the match-burning obsession in public.

Ono doesn't wear jewelry or makeup. The older she gets, the more she resembles Georgia O'Keeffe, of the pared-down unequivocal bones, but it's misleading. There's something fluttery, anxious and insistent about Ono, something yielding until you push against it. "I've always had confidence in my work; confidence as a genius," she told a colleague. But Ono clearly has something to prove, given the global scale of her ambition, which she describes with an unsettling brew of Oprah-like spirituality, flower-child mysticism and a vernacular version of Eastern religion. "Wherever I go I'm trying to heal myself, heal the earth, heal the universe, heal the people who came to the concert or the show," she says.

She began as an artist in the late 1950's, the moment of anti-art, of life as art, of happenings, assemblages, the poetry of the Beats. When Ono made guttural groans while an empty baby carriage was wheeled back and forth across the stage and an amplified toilet flushed, there was a framework for it. Japanese concepts like Zen Buddhism were in the air through John Cage, who made music out of the vagrant found sounds of everyday life. What was Ono's alone was a passion to share everything she'd ever experienced; a lifetime's intimacy with the ritual events of haiku, Kabuki and flower arranging; and a poetic sensibility that pulsed between the suicidal and the inconceivable:

"Blood Piece

Use your blood to paint.

Keep painting until you faint. (a)

Keep painting until you die. (b)"

She wrote poems as cryptic as a Zen koan, and used army surplus canvas to make paintings that invited participation in the poems:

"Painting For The Wind

Make a hole,

Leave it in the wind. "

Eventually the instructions themselves printed on blank canvas became the painting. In the "Yes Yoko Ono," catalog, her archivist, Jon Hendricks, credits her with a seminal role in the creation of Fluxus, and the critic Bruce Altshuler argues for her instruction paintings as the first works in which words -- the idea -- supplanted the object. Not everyone saw it that way at the time. When she first showed her instruction paintings in 1962, Donald Richie, an influential champion of Japanese culture, eviscerated her for ideas "borrowed . . . especially from John Cage" and having "the creativity of a primary school's athletic festival."

"It was terrible!" she recalls. "The language dishonored me, and I'm one of those people who do not feel hurt, even if somebody calls me a whore. Since then I have been humiliated so much by the world that now I think, Oh, again? But that was the first time."

She retreated to a sanitarium. She emerged divorced, remarried to the filmmaker Tony Cox and pregnant with their daughter, Kyoko. Richie's attack engendered "Cut Piece," an excruciating performance in which she appeared onstage with a pair of scissors and invited the audience to cut off her clothes. Kyoko's birth made her feel "trapped the way a man would feel," and some months after her daughter was born, she fled to New York, but Cox and Kyoko followed her. They settled down together, but the marriage disintegrated. After she married Lennon, Ono and Cox shared joint custody of Kyoko until Cox kidnapped her. Headlines throughout the early 1970's chronicled Ono's search for her daughter, whom she did not find until recently, she says, and they have now established a relationship.

John Lennon met Yoko Ono because of her art, a day before the opening of her November, 1966 exhibition in London. "Yes Yoko Ono" takes its title from his favorite piece, called "Ceiling Painting." You climbed a ladder and looked through a magnifying glass, and in tiny letters it said, "Yes." "It's a great relief when . . . it doesn't say, 'No,'" Lennon told Jann Wenner for Rolling Stone. But soon Beatles fans were saying no to Yoko Ono, and they have been ever since. She was the Dragon Lady, "John Rennon's Excrusive Gloupie," as Esquire put it with stunning bigotry soon after they married in 1969.

"I think the image of the Asian woman up until me was Madam Butterfly," she says. "Madam Butterfly is about a woman who had an affair with an American officer and she kills herself. I was touching a sacred cow, but I also didn't seem to be that vulnerable woman who is going to commit suicide. I was coming right at your face." But it's much more than that. She's still as loathed -- and less often immoderately admired -- as she ever was. She's the older woman who infiltrated the Beatles and was blamed for breaking them up, who drove her husband away and manipulated him back, who let Annie Leibovitz photograph her clothed while the pop idol curls around her naked. Lennon took Sean to school and went home to bake bread while she took meetings and leveraged a financial empire. And then there's her work. First, there's the caterwauling she calls music. But beyond that, she used everything in her life -- her problems, her privilege, her opportunities, her difference -- as fodder for her art. Her biggest accomplishment is that she managed to use fame that way too.

Aside from the comedy, glamour and visceral challenge of the early work, Ono's real contribution was to make celebrity into a performance-art piece. She used fame as a material, like paint. She wasn't always very good at it; the art can be sententious. But the only other artist who confronted celebrity head-on was Andy Warhol, and he had to create it to critique and celebrate it. Lennon was her willing collaborator, because he had no choice but to live celebrity from the inside. After she married him, neither did Ono. Even now, she engages in a ritual of self-inflicted exposure, saying that she only decided to go ahead and have Sean because "I had been such a bitch to John." But today, ordinary people on TV reveal intimate details you didn't want to know. Pregnant actresses compete to pose nude for Vanity Fair. Men stay home with the baby. We no longer need Ono to push us or to push around.

Living her life as performance art has carried a price: a love-hate relationship to the love-hate attention she gets. "I want to be normal," she says. "I'm almost goody-goody, because the world suspects so much of me that I say, 'Please realize I'm not a demon.'"

The loathing won't go away. There's always something to fuel it, like questions about whether Julian, Lennon's son from his first marriage, was treated fairly. He has said recently that she was "manipulative," but David Warmflash, who has been the family lawyer since the mid-70's, says that financially he was treated equally with Sean. "Before his death, John would not give Julian money, but Yoko gave him money," he says.

The question about her money occasions a relentless barrage of phone calls from her, correcting, cajoling, amending. Ono says she doesn't know her net worth. "Anybody who gives out their net worth belongs in a mental institution," she says. She's afraid, and she believes she has reason to be afraid; a reporter divulged the couple's address in 1980, she says, and soon afterward Lennon was stalked and killed. "My worth is close to Paul McCartney's," she offers finally, which The Sunday Times of London's Rich List 2000 estimated at 550 million pounds, or about \$775 million. "Why is the money a question that no one will skip?" Ono protests. "Most artists are evaluated for themselves. Would you ask Jasper Johns his net worth? Why does everyone have to ask, Did you break up the Beatles? Life is too short for me to keep on protesting or explaining or making speeches. My work should speak for itself. But my work never spoke for itself; it's taken 40 years for people to respond to the work of 40 years ago."

One evening when I arrive there's a pile of shoes at the door. Yoko Ono is creating her piece for the Ubu Gallery. Since the old days on Chambers Street, when Marcel Duchamp, Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst dropped in on the concerts she organized with La Monte Young, she's invited friends and luminaries to participate in her art projects. Tonight, it's what she calls "the circle of artists I belong to," a mismatched assortment consisting of Kiki Smith, Nam June Paik, Shigeo Kubota, Lawrence Weiner, Donald Baechler, Jann Wenner and Jeff Koons. She's very worried about my presence. "In 20 years we've never had press here with our friends," Havadtoy tells me. Ono tries to draw off the danger. "Don't hurt them with your witticism; you can be witty about me," she offers handsomely. One by one, the artists sit in a generic black office chair, facing her across the last word in digital cameras in the white living room so she can photograph their eyes, then blindfold them and photograph again. The white baby grand piano from Lennon is behind the technician. The early-evening sun skims a sea of Central Park trees, slanting through the window. The look Ono throws them is her over-the-glasses appraising look. She's in the moment.

Jeff Koons wants an art tour of the apartment: the Surrealist paintings of Magritte, a sure key to Ono's sensibility, the ancient Asian and Egyptian sculpture, the 3,000-year-old bronze cat Sekhmet from Karnak, which faces out the window toward Strawberry Fields. "You don't see a lot of self-reinvention in American art," says Baechler. "Think about Ellsworth Kelly doing the same painting for 40 years. I always see that specter looming. How do you keep engaged?"

Ono does it by moving on. Even if it means casting 100 bronze cats with flashing eyes that wouldn't be out of place in a Disney shop. So what if the cats open her up to ridicule? They've saved her from stagnation. As for the ridicule, like everything else, it will just be recycled into another work of art.

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