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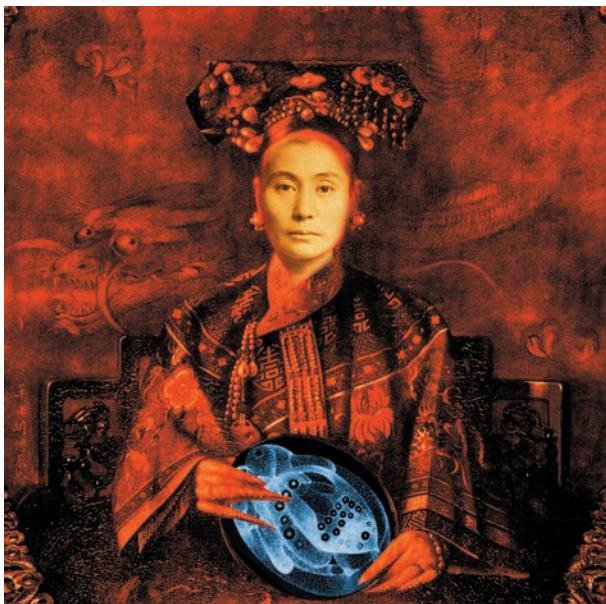
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The Dragon Lady Speaks
An Exclusive Interview
with **YOKO ONO**
Daniel Rothbart





DKR: Your parents had conventional hopes for your future. Was it difficult for you to defy their expectations and join the New York art world in 1960?

YO: Not really. My father had hopes for me to be successful in the accepted forms of art or music. And my mother too. But I really didn't feel any enthusiasm for them and if you're not enthusiastic about something you can't be successful at it, you know.

DKR: Your work has extended to so many areas, from the visual arts, to literature, to music. How would you characterize your interdisciplinary approach to art making?

YO: Well I don't. I don't have any discipline. I just follow my instincts and create something when I'm inspired. I don't think about melting different media together or anything like that, and I don't think in terms of separation. Those sorts of things don't enter my mind. I could be working on numerous projects

at the same time or I could be concentrating on just one because I've become so obsessed with it. It depends on the character of the project. I am centered in a way, and act according to my beliefs. "Belief" is a strange word because at times I don't have any beliefs, but I follow my instincts.

DKR: How has Zen Buddhist philosophy influenced the development of your art?

YO: I think that I was influenced by all different religions and philosophies, including Christianity. Christianity was a large influence, and *Painting To Be Stepped On* is derived from my reaction to Christian history. When Christianity came to Japan, government officials saw it as a threat to their power. They suppressed it and persecuted the Catholics. They did what they thought was an ingenious thing by putting a portrait of Christ on the floor and telling suspected Christians to step on it. If the Christians refused they were crucified. It was a

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Top - Bottom:

Altered image of H.I.M., the Empress Dowager of China, Tz'u-hsi, oil on canvas, by Hubert Vos. Used with permission of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, MA. ©2001 YOKO ONO. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive.

War Is Over! If You Want It, YOKO ONO and John Lennon, 1969. Billboard installed in Times Square, New York. ©1969 YOKO ONO. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive.

YOKO ONO and John Lennon, *Bed-In For Peace*, Amsterdam Hilton Hotel, 1969. Photo Credit: Ruud Hoff. ©1969 YOKO ONO. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive.



very Asian idea that they would not want to step on something because of their incredible respect for it. Many of them didn't step on it and were crucified. They knew that death would be their fate but they wouldn't step on it. It was an incredible expression of faith or respect. You could say it was crazy or great or fantastic, or amazing, any of those adjectives would do. Zen Buddhism was not necessarily the strongest influence, it was just one of the influences.

DKR: Your 1966-97 work *Play it by Trust* could be interpreted as a critique of competitive values in our culture. But you are reputed to be an excellent chess player. Could you discuss your interest in gaming?

YO: I'm not a very good chess player, I'm not excellent at all. I just enjoy playing, but it's not the game I enjoy, game is not the right word for it. As an exercise for the brain chess is important. If I were interested in the game of it I would be interested in winning. It is not winning that interests me but rather exercising my own brain.

DKR: Did the work of Marcel Duchamp influence *Play It By Trust*?

YO: I was influenced by many different creative forces, but I would not count Duchamp as a very strong influence. You may see Duchamp in my work and that's up to you but others may see more Buddhist or existential influences. When I created *Play It By Trust* I wasn't thinking about Duchamp at all. Many artists have worked with chess, but they usually worked with the decorative aspect of the chess pieces. I

wanted to create a new chess game, making a fundamental rather than decorative change.

DKR: Could you discuss your influences?

YO: All religions and philosophies influenced me and many composers influenced me as well.

DKR: Was John Cage among them?

YO: I wouldn't say that John Cage was an influence. He was a very good friend and everything but my work didn't start with John Cage. Cage was a very encouraging and inspiring figure for all of us artists and he changed the history of music. I really respect him for that, but I was more influenced by the twelve tone music of Arnold Schönberg and Alban Berg than the work of John Cage.

DKR: Were there visual artists who inspired you?

YO: When you're an art student, although I did not go to art school, you love all artists in a way. You are influenced by the whole history of art. It would be very difficult for me to pick one artist. Philosophers were closer to me than artists or musicians. The Japanese poet Matsuo Basho was an influence for me.

DKR: Do you see Matsuo Basho as a proto-Fluxus artist?

YO: No, his work comes from a very different direction than Fluxus. Fluxus has a strong sense of humor and has to do with Minimalism and multiples and all that. But Basho is minimal and very Zen and I was kind of affected by him. And that's something that is coming into my work that distinguishes it from general Fluxus work. I shared the Fluxus concept of the principle of things, but the sensibility and texture of my work is slightly different. I think that Basho embodies the kind of Romanticism that I pursue in my work. There is one beautiful poem by him:

Sick on my journey
only my dreams will wander
these desolate moors

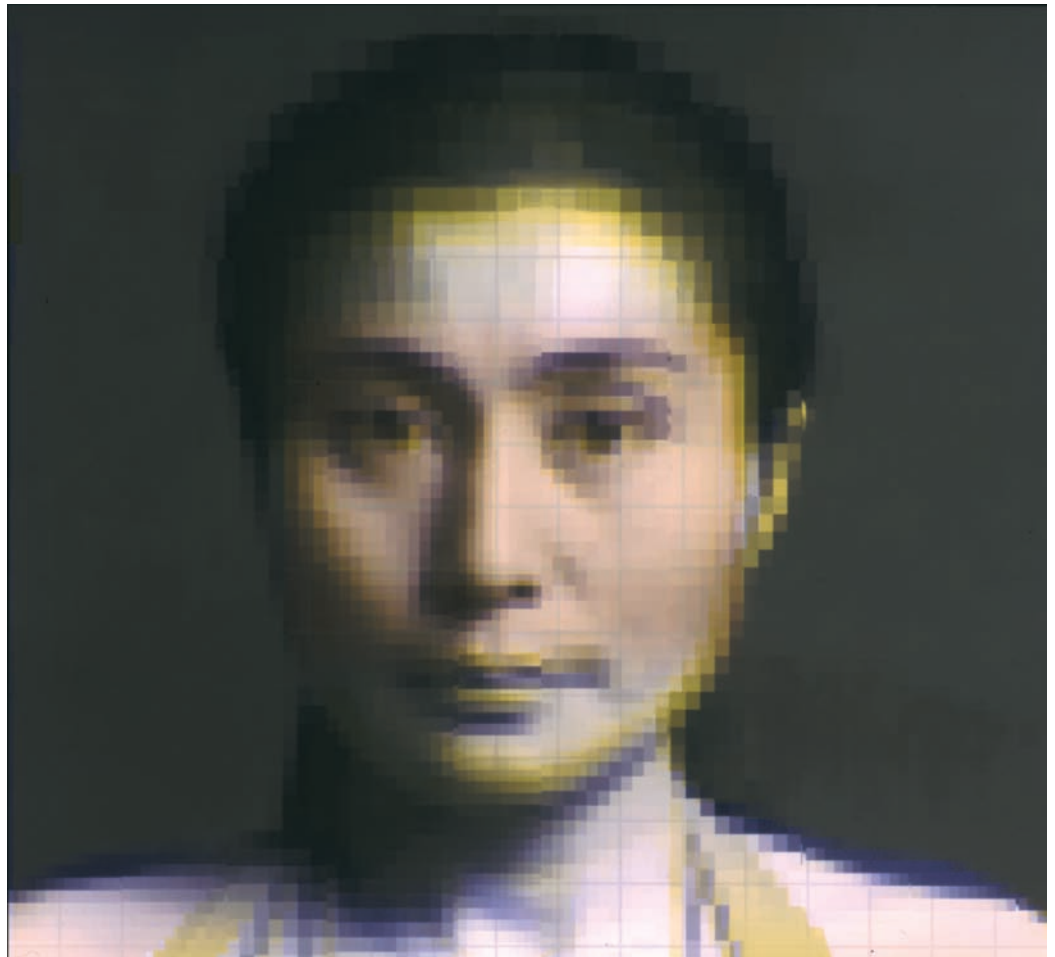
The sense is that he can't move but his dreams are running wild. I just love that, and I think it was the last poem that he wrote before he died. His poems are almost like a travelogue and are very relevant to the journey of life. And he was a traveller, he loved to travel. He ended up falling ill at an inn and he wrote about his dreams running wild. It is the height of Romanticism.

DKR: Do you believe that magic plays a role in art making?

YO: I think life is magic, and art is part of that magic.

DKR: In your article *The Feminization of Society: It's Never Too Late To Start From The Start*, you discuss a nascent "feminization of society" in values of the 1960s counterculture. Could you discuss the feminization of contemporary art in your work and that of others?

YO: I think that the world of Art with a capital A, is a very creative place that can be compared to a woman giving birth to a child. It is basically a very feminine activity. I don't have to discuss the feminization of art because art is



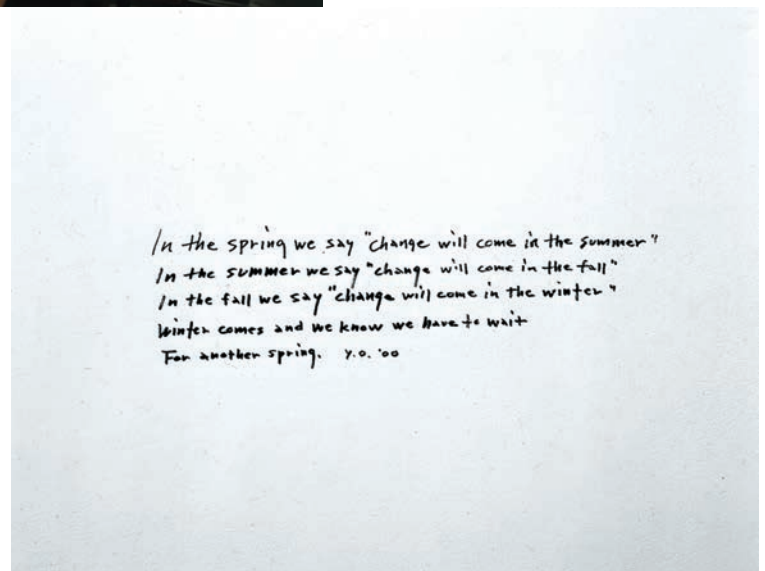
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YOKO ONO, *Portrait of Nora*, 1992, digitally manipulated photograph. ©1992 YOKO ONO. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive.

YOKO ONO, *Four Seasons*, 2000, Yoko writing the text for *Four Seasons* on the wall of the installation at UBU Gallery, NYC, Sept. 2000. Photo Credit: David Behl/©2000 YOKO ONO. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive.

Text:
In the spring we say "change will come in the summer"
In the summer we say "change will come in the fall"
In the fall we say "change will come in the winter"
Winter comes and we know we have to wait
For another spring. y.o. '00

YOKO ONO, *Four Seasons*, 2000, UBU Gallery, NYC, Sept. 2000. Photo Credit: David Behl/©2000 YOKO ONO. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive.





Top - Bottom:

YOKO ONO, Detail: *spring* from *Four Seasons*, 2000. Photo Credit: David Behl/©2000 YOKO ONO. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive.

YOKO ONO, *Play It By Trust*, 1997. Wood chess tables, wood chairs, wood chess sets, all painted white. Collection of the artist. Photo Credit: Miguel Angel Valero. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive and Generalitat Valenciana.

already feminine. Making art is a feminine activity in the world as compared to other activities. When I say that art is a feminine activity I don't necessarily mean that it is an activity for women, I'm talking about the feminine quality in us, which could be seen in men and women in various degrees.

DKR: Certain members of the press have referred to you as the Dragon Lady, to denigrate your strength as a woman. On the cover of your new album *Blueprint For A Sunrise* you depict yourself as T'zu-hsi, the historical Dragon Lady. Could you discuss this choice and its implications?

YO: Well the press referred to me as the Dragon Lady and for a long time I was not very happy about it. But at a certain point I said, look, the Dragon Lady is a beautiful concept because it symbolizes power and mystery. And since then, the moment I faced it, nobody has been interested in calling me a Dragon Lady anymore. It's very interesting how when you confront what you fear it disappears. Other than that, Empress T'zu-hsi, the first Dragon Lady, was such an incredible woman, who was very powerful and actually protected China from foreign invasion. I feel very proud that I'm the second Dragon Lady. In a way T'zu-hsi was protecting her own country, China, which is a very tangible country and John and I were protecting a conceptual country.

DKR: What were the boundaries of the conceptual country that you and John protected?

YO: Nutopia. We announced the founding of a new country called Nutopia at a press conference. The flag was the white flag of surrender, and there is a photo of John and I waving the white flag.

DKR: Why have you chosen the voice as your preferred medium of expression in music?

YO: Vocal expression has something so directly connected to your body and your mind. You're using your body and your mind as opposed to a translator which is an instrument. Its total giving, it's something of you that you're giving on a direct level. It can be compared to giving sex with a vibrator. Getting high with a vibrator is like giving a high with an instrument. Whereas doing it with your voice is really giving it with yourself. Do you see the comparison? (laughs)

DKR: Would you comment on your *Herstory* exhibition last year in Berlin?

YO: The *Herstory* concept was not too familiar in Berlin or Germany and I thought it was a concept that I should introduce. My works that I showed were all related to *Herstory*, having to do with women's pain and repression and survival and all that.

DKR: A number of the songs on *Blueprint For A Sunrise* have explicit lyrics about the battering of women. For many years you were the subject of a lot of male aggression from the press and I wonder if you are purging your own anger through art?

YO: Not really. If I were still angry I would probably have destroyed my health. So just from that point of view I had to move on and transfer my anger into something healthier like art and music. I think with *Blueprint For A Sunrise* I am showing what is actually going on, and how we can get out of it.

DKR: In Tokyo in 1945 you experienced intense allied bombing attacks that were directed against civilians. Did the World Trade Center attacks evoke memories from your past and what conclusions have you drawn regarding September 11th?

YO: I think like most New Yorkers I'm still in shock. But I realized that I had similar experiences when I was a child. I was in Tokyo and they were bombing civilians. So when the World Trade Center happened I was in shock but then I realized that everybody else's body was shaking and my body wasn't shaking. I wondered why and I realized that yes, this was my second experience.

DKR: You cared for your brother and sister during the Second World War so you had to be strong.

YO: The memory is still strong in me.

DKR: Have you drawn any conclusions from the World Trade Center attacks? Do you feel that the world has come any further since World War II?

YO: We are getting wiser. I count on the survival instinct of the human race and I feel that we are definitely going to survive. We are going to solve the problems and the fact that we are confronted with this situation is almost a challenge. When we have to do something I think we are going to stand up and do it right.

DKR: What do you think the World Trade Center represented?

YO: The World Trade Center was the contemporary cathedral of Western culture. Nobody would have cared if they bombed a church these days, you know a church is nothing to most people. But the World Trade Center was the epitome of our culture, our religion being money and business. That was our church.

DKR: During the war in Afghanistan, there were essentially no mass anti-war protests. Do you believe that Americans have become more complacent since the Vietnam war and your *Bed-In*?

YO: The '80s were a time when people were becoming extremely materialistic and they were just making money. At the beginning of the '90s there was a big crash and they got frightened and again in the latter half of the '90s people thought about recovering their finances. That was their main concern in a way. And the politicians really didn't point out how dangerous and precarious the situation was getting outside the United States. But it's always better to give the truth to people. Usually politicians say, "let's not tell them because they'll be too scared" or something, they take the attitude that they are parents and they don't want us children to know something. And we're paying for it.

DKR: Are there any contemporary artists who are extending issues in your *Bed-In* and advertisements for peace?

YO: I don't know. When you throw a pebble in the water maybe you see ripples spreading. It's a very quiet thing and you don't see them until much later. In hindsight you might see them. I am convinced that whatever we do, not just what I do, affects all of us.

DKR: During the Nixon administration's attempts to deport John Lennon, you were subject to wiretapping surveillance by the FBI. How do you personally respond to the Bush administration's request for increased intelligence gathering and secret military tribunals?

YO: (laughs) Well it's happening. That's all I can say. I think that the one danger for peace people or peaceniks or whatever you want to call them, people who believe in peace, is that they try to fight for their ideas. You can't do that. There is already something wrong with the statement "fighting for peace." And you don't fight for it. Don't fight for peace, stand for peace. Other people are doing something that you don't agree with. You leave it alone, don't argue, and just do what you can do. By fighting them you don't get anywhere. You can't make them do what you want them to do. So know what's going on in the administration and just bless it and do what you can do.

DKR: You don't believe in activism as a vehicle for social change?

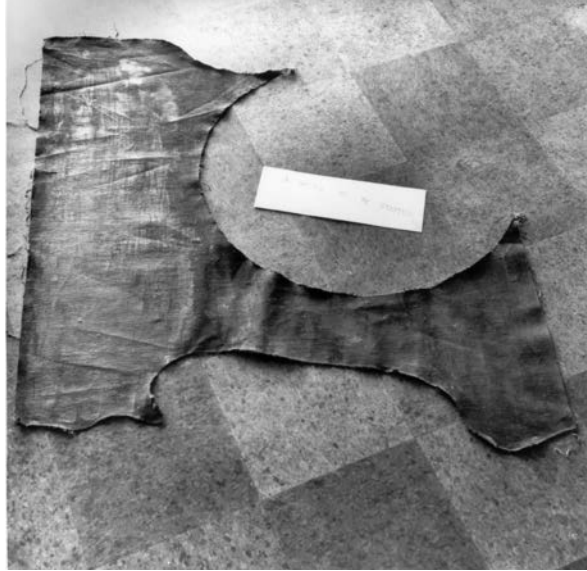
YO: I really think that I am an extremely active person. But we can't do it like the '60s. We need to have another way of doing things because the situation is much more complex. I think that we are dealing with people who don't necessarily understand the importance of a dialogue. Some people are steeped in their convictions almost to the level of insanity, and you don't try to have a dialogue with somebody who is that convinced of something. So how are you going to change the world? How are you going to better the world? How are you actually going to achieve world peace? They are valid questions and dialogue works to an extent but you can't have conversations with insane people.

DKR: In an article for our magazine John Perreault said that you used fame itself as an art material.

YO: Of course but that's all I could do. That's all I could have done so I did it. In other words, as an artist, you have to use the material that is available to you in the environment that is available to you. So if I had another kind of environment available to me I would probably have used that. The fact that John and I joined together was not the reason why my work had a lifeline. It was there and it could have been there in a different environment as well.

DKR: And you collaborated together.

YO: John and I were both artists who believed in the inspiration that we were getting. So sometimes we did things separately as well. Now when you look into the situation you will see many songs were written by John alone and many songs were written by me alone and



then sometimes we came together.

DKR: I have always wondered if *Bed-In* was your idea.

YO: Whatever was credited to both of us was "our" idea. It was just a very good experience and there was a very good reason why we credited the event to both of us.

DKR: It was so revolutionary and important for the world. But at the time you were doing it you were subject to vicious attacks by journalists.

YO: Well I want to thank you for saying that. I just read an article in which they were trying to explain that period and they said that John and I started something "weird." There was nothing weird about it. Calling it weird is a very conventional way of looking at it. There are some people who still look at it that way.

DKR: What do you think globalization and the internet mean for the future of art?

YO: The centralization of art will disappear and we will all be together which we are anyway.

DKR: You often refer to the function of art as increasing the viewer's consciousness. What do you view as the greatest challenges to making meaningful art today?

YO: To open people's minds to their maximum capacity within themselves and together as the world.

DKR: What are your current views on drug use and its relationship to creativity and art making?

YO: Taking drugs to expand your consciousness is an old fashioned idea. We all fell into that trap. It started with Jean Cocteau when he wrote *Opium* and all that. The generation before us, represented by Jean Cocteau and his group of people were taking drugs and we felt, alright they're taking it, why don't we experiment. Otherwise we were missing something is what we thought. So we did experiment, but I definitely think that we can expand our consciousness without drugs.

DKR: How does it feel to see so much of your life's work before you in the YES YOKO ONO retrospective?

YO: I'm very thankful for and encouraged by this phenomenon that people are starting to

care about my work. But at the same time the amount of work that I did is the past for me, in my life it doesn't count for so much. I am just doing my work now and hope to do it in the future. It's nice that people are enjoying my past work but I'm more interested in the future.

DKR: What projects are you working on currently?

YO: I'm working on a new piece for my one-woman gallery show in L.A. at Shoshana Wayne Gallery that will happen almost simultaneously with my San Francisco MoMA show. I'm very excited about the new idea. There will be many works in the Shoshana Wayne show from '95 on but I want to add this new work to it.

DKR: What do you believe is your most important legacy?

YO: They're going to make it up anyway and I hope they're a little bit kinder to me than now. But I don't believe in the legacy so much. If my work is going to give people inspiration, encouragement, and joy after I pass away, then that's beautiful, and I'm thankful. If it does that's fine and if it doesn't I can't complain, that's fine too.

YES YOKO ONO, a retrospective of YOKO ONO's work opens Saturday, June 22 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and runs through September 15. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is located at 151 Third Street (between Mission and Howard Streets), San Francisco, CA, Telephone: 415.357.4000.

my mommy was beautiful, an exhibition of new work by YOKO ONO opens at Shoshana Wayne Gallery on Thursday June 20 and runs through August 24. Shoshana Wayne Gallery is located at 2525 Michigan Avenue #B-1, Bergamot Station, Santa Monica, CA, Telephone: 310-453-7535.

Blueprint For A Sunrise, YOKO ONO's new album is available on Capital Records.

Special thanks to Curt Fritzeen and Francine Hunter McGivern

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YOKO ONO,
A Painting (Work) To Be Stepped On,
Paintings and Drawings
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