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Into the Looking Glass

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Yes Yoko Ono
 San Francisco Museum
 of Modern Art,
 06.22.02–10.08.02
 Exhibition review
 by Dore Bowen

_Into _the_Looking _Glass

"unfiniteness."

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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 "unfiniteness." 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 To be read under a magnifying glass.
 To be read under a microscope.
 To be blown up photographically,
 until it becomes readable.

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."

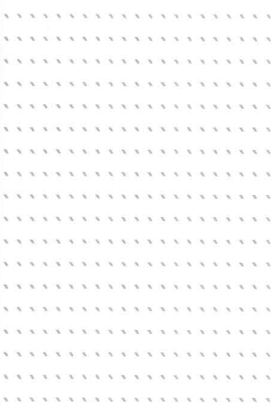
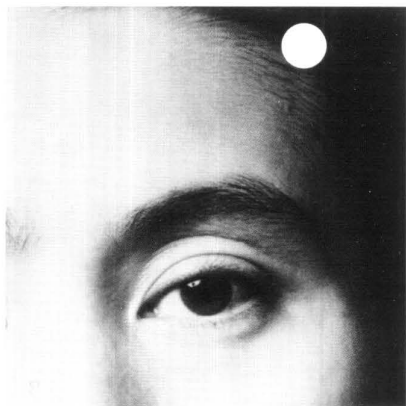
Ono's *Instructions for Photographs* (1961–71) are short word exercises that demonstrate the way images are actively created. These short instructions gnaw away at the illusion of the image as an objective, isolated entity and, hence, empower the viewer to see through the phantom images that haunt the 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.

Time Photo

- 1st stanza Make a photo in which
- 2nd stanza the color comes out only
- 3rd stanza under a certain light, at a certain time of the day.

A "time photo" doesn't exist as an aesthetic object but is the viewer's experience of light, color, and image. The viewer may notice how a photograph looks in the soft blue tint of morning, for instance, or against a colored wall. Ono's text further instructs its reader to make a photo that only emerges "in a certain light." This is, in a metaphorical sense, its optimal moment of viewing—this moment can be thought of as the intersection of photograph, environment, and viewer.

Ono's approach to the photograph, although metaphysical, has a bit of the revolutionary in it as well. In *Kite Piece* (1963), for example, the reader is instructed to make kites out of photographs, fly them, and then ask others to shoot them down. In her installation *Horizontal Memory* (1997), the viewer must step over, and on, anonymous family photographs in order to enter the gallery. Such works call for the viewer to act upon images, even destroy them, rather than simply absorb them.



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 into the world via the lens, thus “finding” the answer to its own question. In other words, the lens is a permeable boundary between inner self and outer world. *Ceiling Painting* challenges our understanding of the lens as l’objectif, as enabling an objective view.

Besides being interdependent, the relationship between viewer and lens is also reversible. In *Ceiling Painting* the viewer comprehends the text via the lens, while the text alters its meaning with each reading. This work further accentuates its reversibility by encouraging the viewer to travel up the ladder toward the lens like film through a camera. At the top of the ladder, the viewer undergoes a shutterlike exposure to the external message—“yes.” In photography, this moment of contact is preserved by a fixing agent, whereas, in *Ceiling Painting*, it is recorded only in

the viewer’s mind. The photograph is believable because it preserves this ephemeral reflection of the outer world on an impressionable surface.

The lens gathers light’s rays, the shutter slices the moment, the film receives the imprint, and chemistry develops and preserves the resulting image. In this way, photography captures light, which is also to say that it arrests time. The rays of light that strike the film travel a distance and carry information from their journey. When one gazes at a star, for instance, one views a speck of the cosmos that left its source before the existence of the human race. 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 Instructure*, Yes Yoko Ono (Japan Society and Harry Abrams, 2001), 284.

² Yoko Ono, *The Word of the Fabricator*, Yes Yoko Ono, 285.

³ Yoko Ono, interview with the author, June 10, 2002.

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.mocanomi.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 Vision: Phenomenology and Post-War Photography*, at the University of Rochester.

Yoko Ono Portrait by Iain Macmillan.

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