A black and white photograph of a street scene. In the foreground, a road with white lane markings is visible. A white car is on the left side of the road, and a dark car is on the right. The middle ground is filled with large, leafy trees that partially obscure the view. In the background, a large, light-colored building with a gabled roof and several windows is visible. The sky is a uniform, light gray.

PAINTING TO LET THE EVENING LIGHT GO THROUGH YOKO ONO 1961



ONCHORD  
AKRON  
y.o. 2007

YOKO ONO

# THE ARTIST IN HER UNFINISHED AVANT-GARDEN

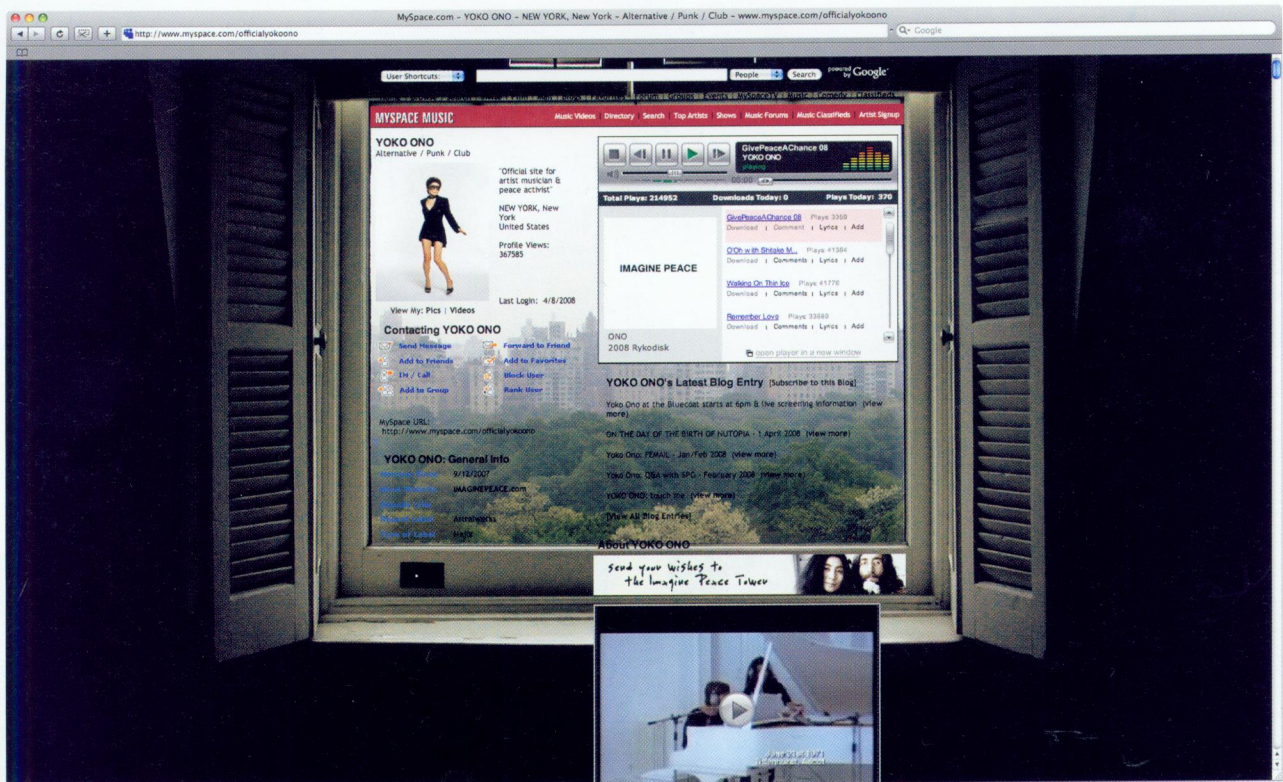
*Having long explored the immateriality of art,  
a celebrated peace icon turns to a fitting new medium  
to unite imaginations: online communities.*



*by HG Masters*

**PAINTING TO LET THE EVENING LIGHT GO THROUGH, 1961,**  
installation view from "Unfinished Paintings and Objects," Indica Gallery London, 1966.  
Photo by Iain MacMillan. Courtesy the Lenono Photo Archive, New York.





The background of Yoko Ono's MySpace page is a photograph of an open window overlooking the treetops in New York's Central Park on a foggy early autumn day. Ono launched her online profile in September 2007 as part of a publicity campaign for her monumental *Imagine Peace Tower* (2007-), a column of light directed into the night sky in Reykjavik, Iceland, for two months every year from October 9, the birthday of her late-husband, John Lennon, to December 8, the day of his death.

Nine months later, Ono has gathered more than 22,000 MySpace admirers; she maxed out her Facebook account's paltry 5,000-friend limit within weeks of its launch. Though she recently celebrated her 75th birthday, Ono's web presence feels particularly natural. On her current official website, [imaginepeace.com](http://imaginepeace.com), home base for daily information about Ono's myriad projects, Ono is notably unguarded, sharing photographs from her recent birthday party and a long, diaristic poem.

Whereas John Lennon once dubbed Ono "the world's most famous unknown artist: everybody knows her name, but nobody knows what she does," a new generation of fans express their admiration for her activism, music and art. On her Facebook Wall where friends can write comments, fans offer quirky messages of love and admiration ("Peace :-)", "go yoko! xoxo-rav") and promote their own social causes, along with the occasional snide

message from still-embittered Beatles fans.

A landmark retrospective of her work, "YES Yoko Ono," curated by Alexandra Munroe at New York's Japan Society, opened in 2001 and toured internationally. Bringing together nearly 40 years of Ono's work, the exhibition reframed her as a seminal but long overlooked conceptual pioneer whose interdisciplinary practice resonates with a younger generation of artists and musicians.

For a multimedia artist with an activist-bent such as Ono, the Internet's potential to convey information to a global audience allows her to communicate a personal yet broadly political message, now distilled into two simple slogans, "I LOVE YOU" and "IMAGINE PEACE." But long before user-generated content, the Internet or even the personal computer, Ono conducted viral advocacy campaigns by melding her disparate interests into a practice that hinged upon audience participation.

In Ono's famous 1965 *Cut Piece* (now circulating on YouTube), she requested that audience members cut away her clothing with scissors. The black-and-white footage shows an impassive Ono sitting on the Carnegie Hall stage as well-dressed audience members shear off pieces of her conservative button-up blouse until a young man ends the performance by aggressively snipping away the straps of her bra. Thirty years later, in her first





(Above) Screenshot from Yoko Ono's official Facebook page.  
 (Left) Screenshot from the official IMAGINE PEACE website.  
 (Top Left) IMAGINE PEACE BOX, 2007, catalog for  
 "Yoko Ono Imagine Peace: Featuring John & Yoko's Year of Peace"  
 exhibition. Published by The University of Akron, Ohio, 2007.  
 All artworks and photographs copyright Yoko Ono.

(Opposite Page) All images: screenshots from Yoko Ono's  
 official MySpace page.

web-based work, *Acorns: 100 Days with Yoko Ono* (1996), Ono posted one instruction from her seminal anthology of text works, *Grapefruit* (1964), each day for one hundred days. Audience participation is necessary to bring the work to fruition.

This concept has its roots in New York's avant-garde circles where many of Europe's artistic luminaries resided after World War II. Ono and her family were survivors of the war in the Pacific. Her father spent years in a Chinese-run prison camp in French Indochina (Vietnam) and was presumed dead; the rest of family survived the war in Tokyo. Reunited after the war, the family eventually moved to Westchester, the tony suburb outside New York where Ono's father worked as a banker. A concert pianist who gave up his musical career to marry into one of Japan's wealthiest banking families, Ono's father provided her with classical music lessons from a young age. She attended nearby Sarah Lawrence College in the 1950s but dropped out before graduation and eloped with a young Japanese composer, Ichiyanagi Toshi, and moved to New York in 1957.

A rebellious spirit enamored with the radical strains of 20th-century music, Ono struggled to translate the complexity of imagined sound into the limited structure of musical notation. Speaking with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2001, she reflected: "When I was living in...Westchester, New York, I was woken

up in the morning by a grand chorus of the birds outside my window. I found myself, automatically, making an attempt to translate the sounds of the symphony of birds into musical notes. Then I realized that since the singing of many, many birds was so complex, I could not possibly translate it into musical notations. I didn't have the ability to, is how I first thought [sic]. But I immediately realized that it was not a question of my ability, but what was wrong with the way we scored music." All of Ono's projects share this underlying frustration: that the material world cannot replicate the purity of ideas.

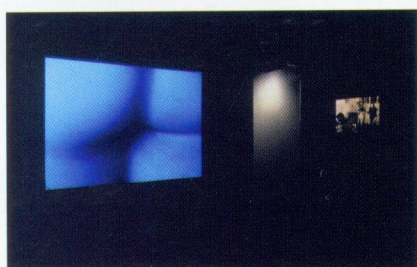
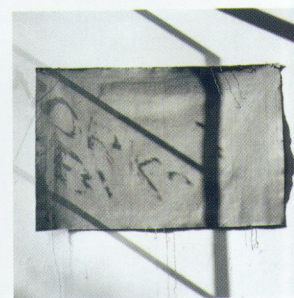
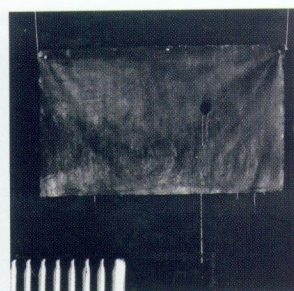
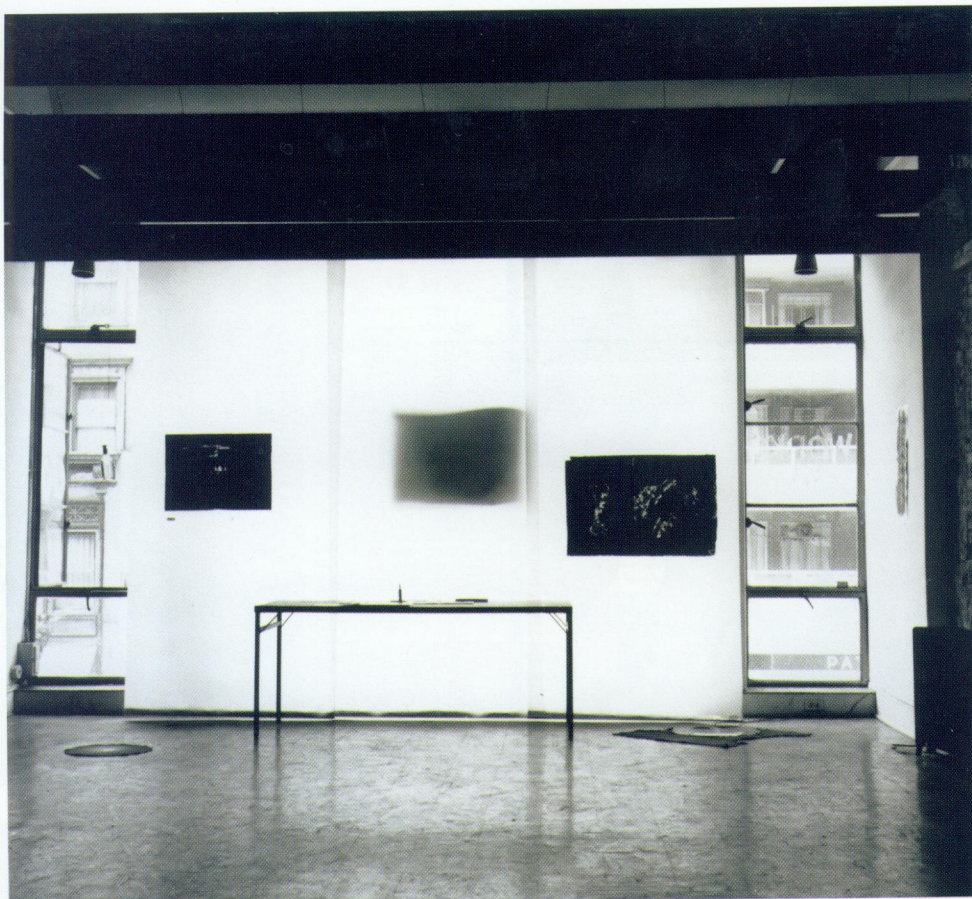
Ono's earliest projects were "event-scores" that used the logic of the musical score to give instructions to the performer. Inspired by experimental composer John Cage, whose compositions grew increasingly non-musical as they incorporated sounds and actions, as well as the haiku tradition and Zen Buddhism, Ono's earliest scores date from the mid-1950s:

#### LIGHTING PIECE:

Light a match and watch till it goes out.  
 1955 Autumn.

*Lighting Piece* echoes themes central to Ono's art for the ensuing five decades: the resemblance of art to events in daily life,





the ephemeral, the performative, a resistance to commodification and materialization, the multi-sensual, democratic empowerment (you can do it yourself!) and the permanently unfinished or destroyed state in which Ono left most her early work. Her “instructure” pieces—the basis for performances, films and objects—invite the audience to experience the art as she had, while acknowledging that everyone’s experience is different.

At the time she was beginning her avant-garde experiments, Ono lived in a fifth-floor walkup loft in lower Manhattan, where she staged poetry readings and musical performances that attracted John Cage, David Tudor, LaMonte Young and other avant-garde figures. One wintry night in 1960, Peggy Guggenheim dropped by with Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst. Ono, too shy to approach Duchamp, recounts how the master of the readymade trod on her *Painting to be Stepped On*—“Leave a piece of canvas or finished painting on the floor or in the street. 1960 winter”—but didn’t notice.

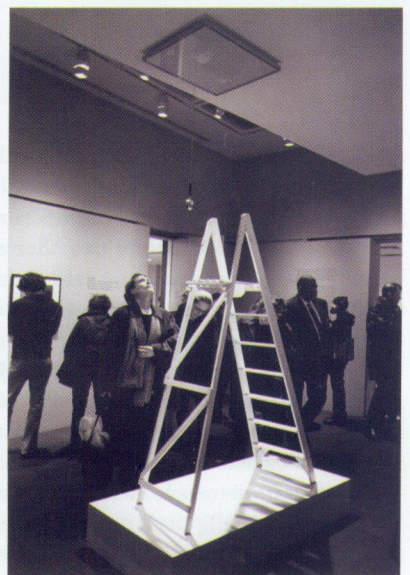
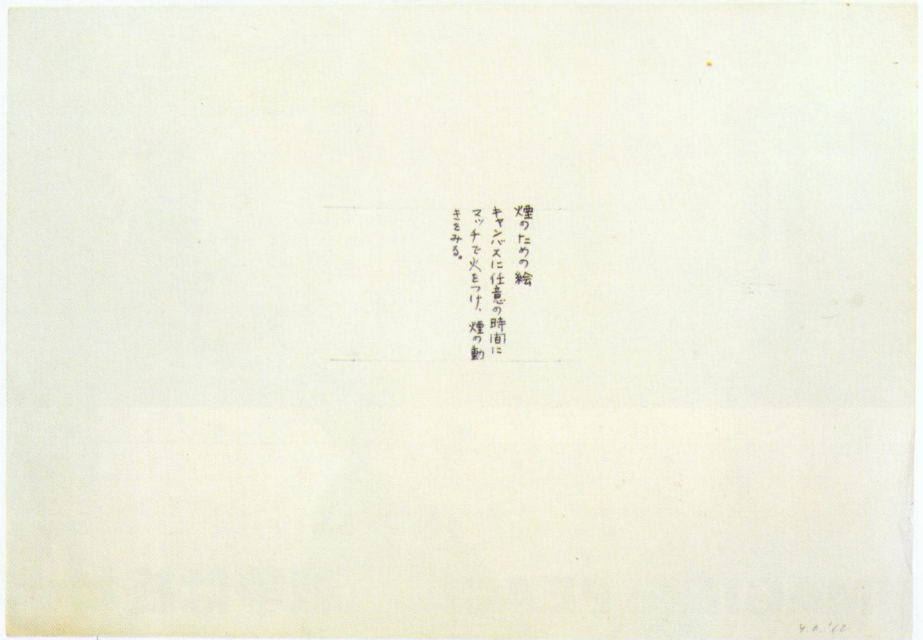
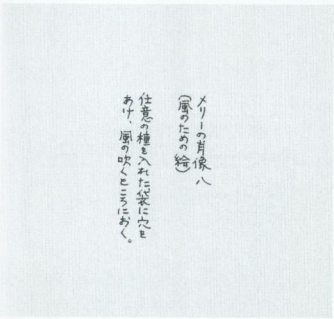
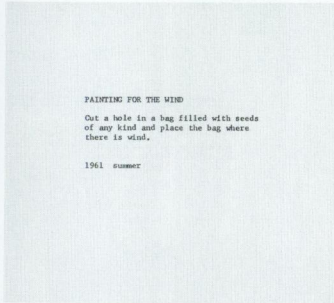
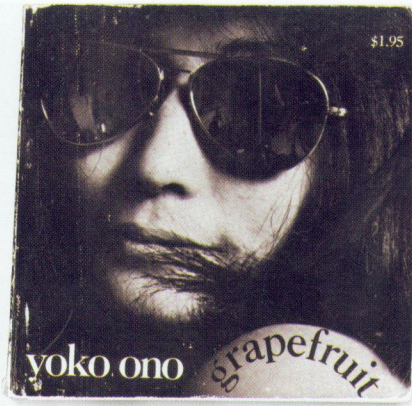
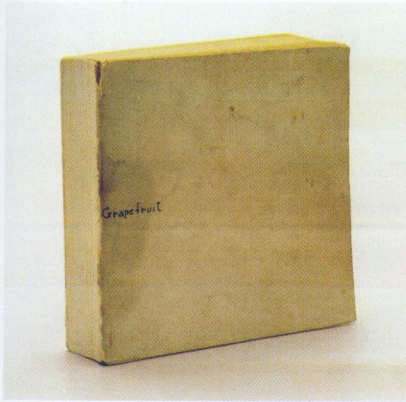
Burning and other modes of destruction were central to the works that Ono displayed at her first solo show in 1961 at George Maciunas’ AG Gallery. She exhibited material manifestations of 13 instruction pieces, including *Smoke Painting* (1961), a suspended piece of canvas that came with an accompanying text: “Light canvas or any finished painting with a cigarette at

any time for any length of time. See the smoke movement. The painting ends when the whole canvas is gone.” For a show at the Sogetsu Art Center in Japan 10 months later in May 1962, Ono exhibited her instruction paintings in their pure, text-only state. She commissioned Toshi to print the texts in Japanese.

Pushing the conceptual boundary further, Ono resisted the materialization of many of her instruction paintings in favor of a more complete conceptual realization. She collected the works in her book *Grapefruit*, first published in 1964 in Tokyo. As Ono told Obrist, “I discovered, that by instructionalizing art, you did not have to stick to the two-dimensional or three-dimensional world. In your mind, you can be in touch with a six-dimensional world, if you wished. You can also mix an apple and a desk.”

Ono became a public persona in the mid-1960s following the censorship in Britain of her collaborative film with Anthony Cox, *Bottoms*, which showed close-ups of 365 nude derrieres. Her romantic and musical involvement with John Lennon, who was famously moved by the tiny positive message, “YES,” printed on the ceiling of London’s Indica Gallery and legible only with the aid of a ladder and magnifying glass, further propelled her into the tabloid limelight. The line between Ono’s art and activism was quickly obfuscated by the media bedlam and the charged political environment of the time.





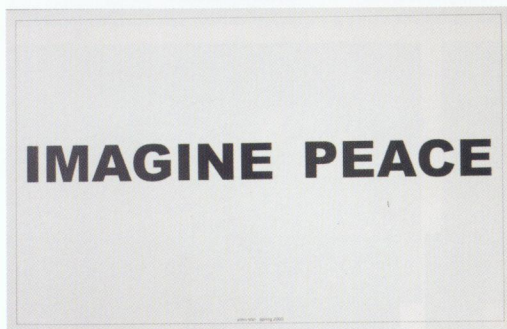
(Opposite Page) All images unless otherwise noted: Photo by George Maciunas; Courtesy The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit. (Vertical Column, Top to Bottom) **SMOKE PAINTING**, 1961, installation view AG Gallery, New York, 1962; **WATERDROP PAINTING**, 1961, canvas, sumi ink, water; **SHADOW PAINTING**, 1961, canvas, sumi ink, shadows (Horizontal Row, Left to Right) **BOTTOMS; FLY; CUT PIECE**, all images: 2001, film installation, photo by and courtesy of Japan Society, New York. (Center) **PAINTINGS & DRAWINGS BY YOKO ONO**, 1961, view of entrance to exhibition at AG Gallery, New York.

(Clockwise from Top Left) All images copyright Yoko Ono: **GRAPEFRUIT**, 1964, book, collection of CV Starr Library, Japan Society, New York; **GRAPEFRUIT**, 1971, front cover of book, New York: Simon & Schuster (fourth printing); 5.25 x 5.25 in, gift of Jacquelyn Baas, courtesy University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; **MUSEUM OF MODERN (F)ART**, 1971, front cover of book, courtesy Printed Matter, Inc., New York; **SMOKE PAINTING (SCORE VERSION)**, 1962; **CEILING PAINTING (YES PAINTING)**, 1966, text on paper, glass, metal frame, metal chain and painting ladder, courtesy Studio One, New York; **WAR IS OVER!**, 1969-70, international billboard campaign in 12 cities, installation view at Times Square, New York; **PAINTING FOR THE WIND**, 1961, instructions in Japanese; **PAINTING FOR THE WIND**, 1961.





(Top) **WISH TREE**, 1996, living trees, wishes written by viewers on paper tags with string in pen, printed instructions. Courtesy Studio One, New York.



## 戦争は終わった!

もしあなたが望むなら

ジョンとヨーコからメリークリスマス

(Bottom Row, Left to Right) **MUSEUM OF MODERN [F]ART**, 1971, page from book, courtesy Printed Matter, Inc., New York; screenshot from the official **WAR IS OVER! (If You Want It)** Facebook group page, by **Yoko Ono**.

Initially, Ono and Lennon leveraged their celebrity status for socio-political causes, most famously in their 1969 *Bed-In for Peace* events in Amsterdam and Montreal following their marriage. Ono and Lennon cast themselves as provocative aberrations in the media's star system, further increasing their celebrity. In December 1969, they rented prominent billboard space in 12 major cities—including Tokyo, Hong Kong, Port-of-Spain, Rome and New York—for their *War is Over!* campaign, which included a concert in London, ads in the *New York Times* and, later, the single *Happy Xmas (War is Over)*. The pair's famous billboard message, "WAR IS OVER! / IF YOU WANT IT / Happy Christmas from John & Yoko," encapsulates Ono's simple but often elliptical use of language.

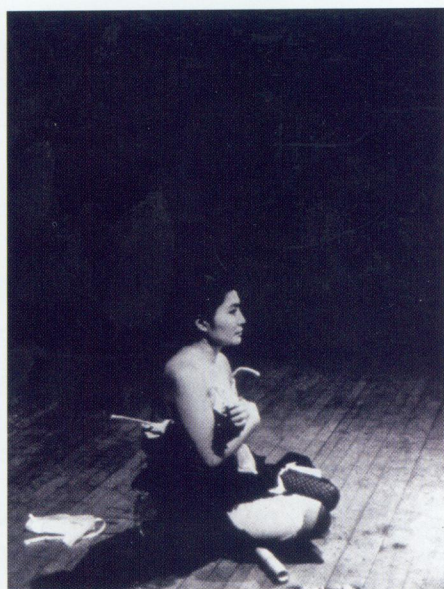
Celebrity drastically changed Ono's reputation from a vanguard artist to a generational icon. Five thousand people lined up on a rainy night to see her mid-career retrospective, "THIS IS NOT HERE," at the Everson Museum in Syracuse in October 1971. Yet, political activism and family life largely derailed Ono's art making (in the strictest sense) for much of the 1970s. It also led to immigration problems for Lennon, as the FBI targeted the couple as dissidents and attempted to deport them from the US. This inspired them to announce the

foundation of their conceptual country Nutopia, which "has no laws other than cosmic," on April 1, 1973. In *The Declaration of Nutopia*, John and Yoko outline that citizenship "can be obtained by your awareness of Nutopia."

Thirty-five years later, a Citizens of Nutopia page on Facebook boasts 2,056 members, with 602 people signed up for the country's anniversary party that was held "in your mind" from 12:00am – 11:55pm on April 1, 2008. The news section of Ono's website records Ono's daily events, including a recent return to Liverpool for a concert at the art center Bluecoat, where in 1967 she asked the audience to wrap her from head to toe in bandages. Though John Lennon remains a fixture in Ono's projects, the past decade has seen growing institutional interest in her work. In her ongoing project, *Wish Tree* (1996-) Ono invites individuals to:

Make a wish  
Write it down on a piece of paper  
Fold it and tie it around a branch of a Wish Tree  
Ask your friends to do the same  
Keep wishing  
Until the branches are covered with wishes.





(Clockwise from Top Left) **BED-IN FOR PEACE**, 1969, photo © Yoko Ono, courtesy Japan Society, New York; **CUT PIECE**, 1964, photo © Yoko Ono, courtesy Japan Society, New York; **Yoko Ono**, courtesy M3-Galerie Gianluca Ranzi, Antwerp; **SKY TV**, 1966, television monitors with live feed from a camera showing pictures of the sky, courtesy Japan Society, New York.

In most installations, the wishes become so numerous that the tree bends precariously and nearly disappears; museums often have to add additional trees to accommodate the volume.

The decade-long Yoko Ono revival has extended to a re-evaluation of her music, and she's even attracted a fresh round of controversy. Ono headlined the Chicago 2007 indie-rock Pitchfork Music Festival, where she played with Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore. Her 2007 album *Yes, I'm a Witch* featured collaborations with young stars Cat Power, Antony and the Apples in Stereo. During the 2004 Liverpool Biennial, citizens objected to Ono's *My Mummy Was Beautiful*, consisting of 50 banners mounted in the city center showing a woman's breast and pubic hair.

This year's marathon schedule of projects includes her first exhibition in New York since 2003, "touch me" at Galerie Lelong. Alongside famous works including *Sky TV* (1966), a television showing an image of the sky, and a four-channel projection of her Carnegie Hall performance of *Cut Piece*, there's an enormous new work, *touch me*, a canvas stretched the width of the gallery and punctured with holes designed to permit visitors to insert various body parts. Visitors can use supplied cameras to photograph themselves and others engaging with the work;

these images are then displayed on another canvas along with viewers' comments.

Shifting the locus of the aesthetic experience from the artist herself to audience members unites Ono's cross-over careers in music, performance art, film, social activism and conceptual art. This effort also mirrors the restructuring of the Internet in the so-called Web 2.0 era, in which user-generated content and personal networks increasingly define the webscape. As Ono observed Obrist back in 2001: "All the stuff we were discussing in the [19]60s in terms of the global village is actually happening now...It's happening on a conceptual level and it will become very physical one day—in fact it's becoming physical already."

In 1969, Ono pronounced: "THE MESSAGE IS THE MEDIUM," an inversion of and rebuttal to new-media theorist Marshall McLuhan's famous formulation. Ono was a herald for the current interdisciplinary era, in which the boundaries between the arts have blurred and the partition between art and not-art has relaxed. As a fitting index of Ono's popularity and influence, she's gaining an average of nearly 200 new friends on MySpace every day.

Yoko Ono is currently included in the world-touring Chanel Mobile Art Pavilion (SEE P. 88), "touch me" continues through May 31 at Galerie Lelong, New York.