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Yoko Ono and Her Contributions to Feminist Art

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Dedication

I dedicate this report to all my lovely friends, my parents and my professor Dr.Liu, for their love and help.

Abstract

Yoko Ono and Her Contributions to Feminist Art

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With her music, films, performances, poetry, paintings, and sculptures, Yoko Ono has remained a seminal figure in Avant-grade culture since the 1960s. Her feminist art is inextricably related to the development of Conceptualism and Fluxus. Ono's feminist art is distinct from the rest of her work as it combined instructions, realization, audience participation, and use of language as a form of art. This report discusses the feminist art movement with a particular emphasis on Yoko Ono, which is based on a comprehensive search and review of literature, with over fifty academic materials reviewed. The study explores the contributions of Yoko Ono within feminist art and what differentiate her from other feminist artists in art history. The discussion within the study suggests that Ono's feminist artwork are not only restricted to painting, but also including poetry, painting, music, film, and sculpture among others. One section of the report analysis shows how Ono's marriage to Lennon contributed to the popularity of her feminist artwork, particularly the popularity of her works within the pop culture. Similarly highlighted within the discussion is the bearing of Ono's racial and transnational identities to her unique feminist practice. Drawing on the study objectives, the research

concludes that Yoko Ono made significant contributions to the feminist art movement, and acted as a symbolic figure in contemporary feminism.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The onset of the mid-20th century saw significant contributions of women in different areas such as painting, performance art, music, and poetry.¹ The Feminist Art Movement seen today are resultant of the earlier triumph made by earlier feminist artists. Concisely, the feminist art can be termed as gender identity representation using art.² Field described feminist art as a concept that exposes the discrimination against women within society and any kind of challenge they face.³ Chicago defined feminist art as art that reaches out to women, affirming and validating their experiences to make them feel good about themselves. She indicated “feminist art is all the stages of a woman giving birth to herself.”⁴ In brief, feminist art explores the subject of female discrimination. The dedication of the feminist art activists is significant to be highlighted with immense inspiration for the liberation of women today. Nevertheless, authors and researchers in the fields of literature and gender studies (among other related fields) have given some of these women less attention than they deserve.

Yoko Ono is a significant figure to feminist art. The contributions she made to the feminist art were in boarder fields as compared to other female artists in feminist art history. For decades, Yoko Ono’s daring art practice has been breaking new grounds as

¹ Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart, *America Popular Culture Through History: The 1980s* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007).

² Jill Fields, “Frontiers in feminist art history,” *A Journal of Women Studies*, 33, no.2 (2012): 1-21.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Judy Chicago, *What is feminist Art?* <http://judychicago.com/application/assets/pdf/what-is-feminist-art.pdf> (accessed Feb 10, 2015).

opposed to the works of other female artists. Ono's artwork has been consistently exhibited till nowadays, creating installations and performances. Some of the installations and performances are re-staged works from her earlier performances in 1960s.

There are a couple of distinctive qualities for talk about Ono's work. First, her work is specifically based on the drive to make art participatory. She based her performance approaches on the precept that audiences subconsciously absorb messages when they consume them passively. A few of her performances, such as *Cut Piece*, were intended to enable passive audience consumption. Second, as mentioned above, Ono's feminist art pieces are not only restricted to certain area. Her artworks include painting, performance art, music, poetry, and movie, which will be discussed later. In addition, Ono had a unique racial identity as an Asian immigrant in the United States. The diverse racial diversity implied her acceptance in most contexts, with popular endorsement in all contexts. Her racial diversity also enabled her to be a transnational feminist, crossing from west to east without resistance. Last but not least, Ono's marriage to Lennon brought her to the public and pop culture, fanning her popularity further.

Despite her creative enthusiasm in feminist arts, Ono is not sufficiently discussed within the extant literature on feminist art. Consequently, this study is set to review and discuss the devotions of Ono as a feminist art activist. At the meantime, the study highlights other feminist art activists in the history of Feminist Art Movement. The study suggests that feminist art activists, particularly Yoko Ono have made meaningful contributions to the contemporary artwork and the status that women artists base their work today.

Background of the Study

The Feminist Art Movement began in the 1960s through to 1970s. Unlike most other movements in art history, the Movement was fuelled by political, personal, and academic goals. As the Feminist Art Movement portrayed a larger picture of women's contribution in art, it coincided with the larger feminist movement that was perceived to represent the interests of women who were fighting against discrimination by male members of society.⁵ Its contribution included advocating for the inclusion of female artists in museums and galleries and building institutions that would favor the interests of women. Between the mid and late 1960s, the Feminist Art Movement expanded its emphasis to include female consciousness, exhibitions' equal distribution, and economic fairness.⁶ The continued vibrant operation of the Movement gained its momentum with the inception of the second wave of feminist art activism in the 1970s.

A notable contributor to the second wave of this movement was Lucy Lippard, who led a major protest against the exclusion of female artists from museum exhibitions and galleries in both Los Angeles and New York.⁷ The second activist in the movement was Linda Nochlin, who is known for launching the first undergraduate course in art history of women artists in the United States.⁸ In her 1971 seminal essay titled *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists*, Nochlin demonstrated the barriers that were brought by the institutions hampering the progress of women in the field of art. It is this

⁵ Jill Fields, "Frontiers in feminist art history," 2.

⁶ Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The feminist critique of art history," *The Art Bulletin*, 69, no. 3(1987): 326-357.

⁷ Lucy O'Brien, *She Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop And Soul*. (New York: A&C Black, 2013).

⁸ Jill Fields, "Frontiers in feminist art history," 4.

article that formed the foundation for the inquiry of feminists,⁹ from which today's feminist art history originates. In addition to the two mentioned front runners, there are also other women who were instrumental in the Feminist Art Movement. They include Yoko Ono, Judy Chicago, Sutherland Harris, and Merriam Schapiro.

Despite the enrichment feminist artists brought to the contemporary art field, these artworks have not received the equal acknowledgement that they deserve (Field 2). According to Nochlin,¹⁰ the onset of the Feminist Art Movement saw the female arts staple over the concept of the time that a woman could not produce a great art work thereby taking a lot of time and energy fighting such notions. Feminist artists have been struggling to seek respect and attention for their works among society.¹¹ However, it can be observed that the level of recognition for female-produced artworks has been increasing not only in the United States but in other parts of the world, attributed largely to the Feminist Art Movement activists.

Yoko Ono was among the most influential feminist art activists who has outstandingly dedicated to the recognition of women artworks not only in the United States but also in her motherland, Japan. As a key figure in the 1960s and the 1970s, her artwork has demonstrated a powerful reference to feminism,¹² with all of her performances directly addressing gender and/or social issues.¹³ "In a scene dominated by men, one of Ono's most landmark accomplishments was to position her work in such a

⁹ Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The feminist critique of art history," 326.

¹⁰ Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no great women artists?" *Art and Sexual Politics*, 1-22.

¹¹ Peg Brand, "Feminist art epistemologies: Understanding feminist art," *Hypatia*, 21, no. 3(2006): 166-189,

¹² Shelina Brown, "Scream from the heart: Yoko Ono's rock and roll revolution," In *Countercultures and popular music*, eds. S. Whiteley & J. Sklower (London: Ashgate), 171-190.

¹³ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

manner that it brought out a paradoxical undercurrent of collusion between those furthering the inherent boundaries in artistic performances, and those confronting the patriarchal values of the mainstream society.”¹⁴ Her perception of a distinct and critical analysis of collage aesthetics distinguished her affirmative gesture in all her performances.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to explore the contributory factors brought about by the Feminist Art Movement with particular reference to efforts made by Yoko Ono. The study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To discuss Yoko Ono’s background and how the background has shaped her feminist movement activism.
2. To explore the literature gap and under discussion of Yoko Ono within the extant literature.
3. To understand Yoko Ono’s impact on Feminist Art Movement.
4. To evaluate Yoko Ono’s role in transnational development of feminism.
5. To present Yoko Ono as a symbolic figure in the contemporary feminism.

Structure of the Study Report

This report is presented in three main chapters: the introduction chapter, the literature review chapter, and the conclusion and recommendation chapter. The introduction chapter introduces the study topic, the research background and gives the

¹⁴ James M. Harding, *Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminist, Artists, and the American Avant-Garde*. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

aim and objectives to which the study is aligned. The literature review chapter outlines the methodology that was used to obtain the review materials and then reviews the extant literature. Finally, the chapter concluded with recommendations for future study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter includes a review of existing literature on feminist art, specifically that of Yoko Ono and her contributions to modern feminist art. In addition to summaries of existing literature, the details of how each reference was selected will be included in subsequent paragraphs.

Methodology for Literature Search

1. Search Period

The search for materials to be used in this report concentrated on books, academic articles, and credible websites published between 2000 and the present date. However, particular emphasis was given to some older but significant materials that had important historical information on Feminist Art Movement.

2. Search Terms and Phrases

In order to get the relevant materials for the current study, some specific search terms were used. The key search terms used to identify relevant materials during the search include the following;

- Feminist Art Movement in the 1960s and 1970s
- Yoko Ono's contributions to Feminist Art Movement
- Yoko Ono's background information
- Yoko Ono's marriage to Lennon
- Yoko Ono's performances
- Transnational feminism

3. Search Databases

Although the search for materials was conducted both in the library and online, the majority of the materials used were books and journals from different databases and the library. Some of the search databases included the following;

- Google Books
- Google Scholar
- SOCIndex
- Gender Studies Database
- Academic Search Complete

4. Inclusions and Exclusion Criterion

Following the initial searches, the author included books, peer-reviewed articles, journals, and websites discussing the contents that bordered on the Feminist Art Movement and Yoko Ono. Particularly included were materials that focused on Yoko Ono's background and her contributions to Feminist Art Movement. Attempts were made to include only topic-specific and up-to-date resources, except where the old resources had significant historical facts on the topic of study. Excluded were documents that were not published in English. Materials that were non-topic specific information, such as those without particular specificity on Yoko Ono's contributions to Feminist Art Movement were similarly excluded.

5. Search Results

In total, over a hundred materials were identified before they were narrowed down to about fifty relevant and topic-specific sources. The review, commencing from the subsequent section on Yoko Ono's background is based on this search result.

Yoko Ono's Background Information

Prior to highlighting Ono's contributions to Feminist Art Movement, it is important to discuss her background information to understand how her upbringing and culture helped develop her individualistic mind and influence her artwork later on. Ono's family was severely affected by the aftermath of the Second World War. Despite this, Ono was highly educated; the school she went to even offered an English class, which was rare for a female back to the old time in Japan. Hopkins suggested that Ono's teachers criticized her unconventional manner of writing poems throughout her schooling, which sparked her rebellious nature.¹⁵ Her alienation as a youth greatly contributed to her artistic development and her love for education. She pursued a degree in higher education at the age of eighteen. Her parents' original ways of delegating roles to her greatly led to her personality formation. Ono's childhood and adolescent life had been characterized by separation and denial from a father who was married to his job and a mother who was detached from her child-rearing responsibilities.¹⁶

Understanding of Ono's work on her concepts of power and women's place in society has a lot of connection with her upbringing and background. Her endeavors in the world of art have introduced several challenges to the conventional thinking of the general public. Her experimental artworks and artistic talents have been attributed to her

¹⁵ Jerry Hopkins, *Yoko Ono*. (New York: Macmillan, 1986).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

unique youthful lifestyle that was considered complicated making it necessary to analyze and understand her childhood background so as to understand the artwork.¹⁷

Ono was born in 1933 to Eisuke and Isoko Ono, but did not meet her father until she was three years old. Coming from a royal family, Ono enjoyed many privileges during her childhood. At the age of three, Ono moved to the United States and returned to Japan in 1937. In the year 1940, Ono's mother took her back to the United States and headed to California, and then later to Manhattan. While in Manhattan, Ono got exposed to feminist ideals and the Western democratic thoughts. After settling in Greenwich Village, Ono began writing poetry. It is during this period that Ono adapted to the new learning and living environments. Her skills in poetry were observed in her early life; Ono had the skills to recite the folktales she learned from the servants.¹⁸

In 1941, Ono and her family returned to Japan only to be caught up in the Second World War. The war experience had an adverse effect on Ono's family, subjecting her and her family to starvation after the war. Thanks to her family's association with the royal family and connections that helped them pull through the tough times. Her obsession with poetry was evident by the manner in her prolific writing; many of her pieces were critiqued by her schoolmate, the son of the Emperor. Ono was labeled unfit for the conventional style of poetry by her teacher, who viewed her poems like novels and essays like fictions depicting her rebellious personality from a tender age.¹⁹ It was also evident from her lifestyle that she was rebellious toward social norms in that she

¹⁷ Ibid, 74.

¹⁸ Ibid, 54.

¹⁹ Ibid, 65.

maintained the curly hairstyle popular in the west and indulged in sex, cigarettes, and alcohol. Her alienation during her youthful period could have been the greatest assets to her artistic aesthetic development. This could also be the contributory factor to her love for education. At the age of eighteen, she pursued her degree in higher education at the college of Sarah Lawrence.²⁰

Ono's life experiences were greatly influenced by the generational clashes with her parents, representing the first and the second generations of the Japanese Americans. The characteristics of these generations were made with their adaptation to the new world.²¹ It has also been evidently demonstrated that the first generation of Japanese Americans have maintained their traditional Japanese cultural traits that include achievement in the education sphere, patriarchal household system, and dwelling in non-Japanese-dominated neighborhoods. Despite Ono coming from a well-off family, their lifestyle was influenced by their traditional cultural traits. Her frequent traveling back and forth between Japan and the United States, her experience of life within the war-ridden Japan, and the role of her parents in her upbringing were all essential in forming her personality and the development of her talents.²²

Ono's parents were unconventional in their delegated roles; she had a father that she hardly knew who had wished for a son instead of her, more specifically a son that would have been a concert pianist just like him. Having known that she was a

²⁰ Nick Johnstone, *Yoko Ono 'talking'* (London: Omnibus Press, 2005).

²¹ Evelyn Nieves, "To Work and Die in Juarez," *Mother Jones*.

<http://motherjones.com/politics/2002/05/work-and-die-juarez> (Accessed July 21st 2014).

²² Lynn Douglass, "Yoko Ono honored for feminist art, says not saying anything with art "a waste," *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/lynnouglass/2012/11/19/yoko-ono-honored-for-feminist-art-says-not-saying-anything-with-art-a-waste/> (accessed November 10, 2014).

disappointment to her father, she opted to live her life in the best way she could. Her mother, on the other hand, was a socialite who had no time for submission to her husband and care to the children's upbringing. She neglected the needs of Yoko, leaving her to the care of the servants. The mother seemed to lack the traditional role of a Japanese woman who was expected to be submissive to the husband and a good mother to the children.²³

Her mother's insensitive nature was epitomized when a doctor visiting their home attempted to kiss Yoko. When she told her mother of what had happened, her accusations were dismissed. Later in life, Ono was heard saying, "I often wish my mother had died so that at least I could get some people's sympathy,"²⁴ as she likened her mother to "somebody on a screen, always pleasant, always smiling at you, but she didn't give."²⁵ Despite the distant relationship that Ono shared with her parents, and in particular the mother, she still played an indispensable role in her character shaping. Regardless their ongoing conflict, it is essential to note that it was her mother's efforts that were responsible for their survival during the war and the aftermath.

The Influence of Ono's Marriage on her Artistic Works

There are two popular versions of how Yoko and John Lennon met. The first version indicates them meeting at the Indica Gallery in London where Ono was preparing her exhibit of conceptual art. The two were introduced by the owner of the gallery, John Dunbar. Lennon was apparently unimpressed with the exhibitioners' works that he saw, and began to hammer a nail into a clean board until he was stopped by Ono. At this, the

²³ Hopkins, *Yoko Ono*, 14.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

owner of the gallery intervened and from that, it is said that the two began seeing each other.²⁶

The second version, as told by Paul McCartney, provides a different story. This version holds that Ono and Lennon's first meeting took place in 1965 in London during which Ono was compiling her original musical scores for a book. When McCartney indicated declined to provide Ono with his manuscript, Lennon obliged to provide her with his original lyrics that were handwritten.

The most important analysis in this paper is on the contribution of Lennon to Ono's art life. The relationship between these two resulted in Lennon fully sponsoring Ono's solo show in London at the lesson gallery in 1967. The following year, Ono and Lennon took advantage of Lennon's wife's absence and spent a great deal of time together and make collective recordings. The two virgin albums were recorded in 1968.²⁷

Lennon's "Happiness is a warm gun" was done in 1968, and contained references to the bond between him and Ono. The last two years that Lennon spent with The Beatles saw their collective public protest against the war in Vietnam, and culminated with Lennon's marriage to Ono on March 20, 1969 at the office of the registrar in Gibraltar, after which they went for honeymoon in Amsterdam. They proceeded to the Queen Elizabeth hotel in Montreal City, where they made another collective recording known as "Give peace a chance." Their union had witnessed both of them collectively take part in combined advocacy and performance art such as bagism, which was introduced at the

²⁶ Ingrid Pfeiffer and Max Hollein, eds. *Yoko Ono Half-A-Wind Show—A Retrospective*. (Munich: Prestel, 2013).

²⁷ John Lennon and Yoko Ono. *Some Time in New York City*. © 1972 by Apple Records, Compact Disc.

press conference in Vienna. During this period, the two satired the stereotyping and prejudice that was being practiced in society by wearing a bag all over their bodies.

Ono enjoyed the comfort knowing nothing could prevent her from recording, not even the accident that she had been involved in. During her convalescence, “Lennon arranged for a king-sized bed to be brought to the recording studio as he worked on the Beatles' last recorded album known as the Abbey Road.”²⁸ In 1968 alone, the two had written and recorded the Beatles’ “Unfinished Music Number One: Two Virgins,” “Musique Concrete,” “The White Album’s Revolution Nine,” “The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill” and “The Birthday.”

After The Beatles disbanded, Ono and Lennon lived together in London and then moved to New York. However, their relationship underwent some strains due to the deportation threats that Lennon received, having been charged with drug offenses, and Ono experienced separation from her daughter. The strained relationship persisted and in 1973, the couple separated with Ono pursuing her career while Lennon lived between New York and Los Angeles. In 1974, Lennon and Ono met again with the latter claiming to have found the cure for smoking. Although they did not fully come back together as husband and wife, Ono would continue seeing Lennon, despite the fact that he was living with another woman, May Pang. In 1975, Lennon and Ono had a son called Sean who was the favorite of the father, having claimed that Sean was a planned pregnancy while describing Julian, his first son, as a result of unplanned pregnancy. Sean, as an adult, has

²⁸ Adrienne Rich, “Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts” in *Arts of the Possible: Essays in Conversation*, ed. NAME (City: Publisher, 2008), 98-103.

followed in the footsteps of his parents with his solo performances and at times working with his mother.²⁹

Ono was with her husband when he was murdered in 1980. The trauma of witnessing the experience made her go into seclusion for five years. Her contributions to the art world until that point had been courtesy of her husband, who provided her with both emotional and financial support. In appreciation to the input that Lennon had put in her life, Ono “funded the construction and maintenance of the Strawberry Fields memorial in New York City's Central Park, directly across from the Dakota Apartments where they lived and Lennon died.”³⁰ This construction was dedicated on his 45th birthday in 1985; in 1990 there was a similar celebration marking Lennon’s would-be 50th birthday. In her continued struggle to denounce war and its effects, Ono found Lennon’s birthday as a perfect opportunity to decry the wars taking place in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Germany. The dedication was facilitated with the participation of over one thousand stations from over fifty countries.

Under-Discussion of Yoko Ono within Extant Literature

Traditional historians oversimplified Ono’s contributions to art by placing her within the Fluxus camp, thereby minimizing her efforts. Detailed understanding of conceptual artwork in relation to the language of art among New York artists and the work of Fluxus do not show the role she plays through her contributions. It is also implied that Ono’s contributions to conceptual art were not taken seriously being that she

²⁹ Joanna Frueh, “The Body Through Women’s Eyes” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. NAME (City: Publisher, 2007), 190-207.

³⁰ Ibid, 203.

was considered to be a radical artist. After the Second World War, Ono thought of her art as promoting a form of creative thinking by drawing out the destructive reality.

Danto, writing about the demeaned role of Ono in the performing arts, commented as follows: “Yoko Ono is really one of the most original artists of the last half-century, yet her fame made her almost impossible to see.”³¹ The public consciousness about Yoko Ono has been blurred by her marriage to John Lennon fame. Many people have attributed her success in the artistic field to The Beatles’ success and view her relationship with her husband as parasitic in nature for her own benefits. Moreover, the academic world has also been more interested in analyzing Ono’s biography instead of her artistic works.³²

The typical book on Ono does not portray her as an individual artist, but rather makes reference to her success in relation to her husband, Lennon. The book would likely be structured in four main chapters: ‘Ono before John,’ ‘Yoko and John,’ ‘Yoko after John’ and finally the ‘Afterthought,’ an indication that she could not be referenced as an individual.³³ Many scholars have also portrayed a view that were it not for her marriage to Lennon, her entire collection of works would not have made any impact on the art world, neither would she have been recognized. The emphasis on her association to Lennon indicated that her husband would not be forgotten at any mention of Ono, since

³¹ Arthur C. Danto, “Life in Fluxus,” *The Nation* vol, no. # (2000): 34-36.

³² Ibid.

³³ Erica-Lynn Huberty, “Art as Creative Dialogue: An Interview with Yoko Ono,” *Sculpture* 19, no. 10 (2000): 40-45.

her success and achievement could not have sustained the signs of time were it not for the involvement of her husband and The Beatles.³⁴

Although the period of her life that intersected with Lennon was seen as one of the noisiest periods in terms of public attention through the media, it should not be forgotten that Ono as an individual was very active in the artistic world. Alongside helping her husband with the release of his music, Ono also released her own music like “Remember Love” on the B-side of the album released by the Plastic Ono Band.³⁵ It is therefore necessary for the art scholars to start viewing Ono outside the box of the marginalized group of Japanese women of the twentieth century and concentrate on her contributions to conceptual art.

One could insinuate that her failure to be recognized fully through her contributory works to the conceptual art could have been due to the associative nature with her husband’s work. However, her efforts have been minimally viewed due to the fact that traditional historians have oversimplified her achievements by placing her within the Fluxus camp. Fluxus was an internationally recognized group regarded as anti-art spearheaded by George Maciunas.³⁶ This group formed in 1962 with the inception of Maciunas’ organization of Fluxfests that swept across Europe.

It should be remembered, however, that at this period, Ono’s contribution to the art world had already grown to maturity as was demonstrated through her instructional pieces—“Painting to see the Room”—from 1961. Historians should have therefore

³⁴ Ibid, 43.

³⁵ Kyle Gann and Ann Powers, “Yokology: Two Critics Discuss the Ono Aesthetic.” *The Village Voice*, vol, no. # (1996): 49, 54.

³⁶ Lawrence Alloway, “Art as Words as Art,” *The Nation*, vol, no. # (1970): 188-189.

categorized her as a proto-Fluxus artist whose practices witnessed the formation of this group together with the line of thought driving the movement. It could be observed that her contributory efforts to the group were so enormous that both the Asian and Buddhist influence were introduced to the group, in addition to encouraging many Japanese artists to join the Maciunas organization.³⁷ The historian scholars should therefore be reminded to stop portraying Ono as having been influenced by the Fluxus and portray her as an influence of the group in order to allow her works not be overshadowed by the works of other peers of the 1960s.

The book, *Words to be looked at: Language in 1960s Art*, by Kotz scantily mentions Yoko Ono and her works used to provide similarities and differences with the other artists' works. However, Yoko Ono's prolific contributions in both the musical and visual arts have persisted for over a half a century with her efforts observed to consistently push for the language role in establishing conceptual boundaries. The period between the late 1950s and the early 1970s saw Ono getting involved in the production of many conceptual works.³⁸

Based on Ono's magnificent contributions to the art world during this period, it is surprising that Kotz would give her such a minimal acknowledgement, especially since her touch on the instructional paintings introduced a divergent skill from the ones that were being laid by Brecht and Young. Such masterpiece alone ought to have motivated the author to treat her work with respect bearing in mind the foundation Ono had laid in

³⁷ Yoko Ono, "Coughing is a Form of Love: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young philosopher." In *Yoko Ono: between the sky and my head*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Köln: Cornerhouse, 2008), 148.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 148.

the art language in the 1960s. Kotz is not the only scholar who does not give Ono her due attention based on her contribution to conceptual art; her numerous exhibition catalogs were published in the 1990s with no scholar providing her works with a critical focus.³⁹

A deeper understanding of conceptual artwork in relation to the art language that looks at the New York artists and the works of Fluxus do not indicate the central role played by Yoko Ono through her contributions. The historians have, however, just positioned her role as a companion of the significant artists of the time. Such an attitude and approach could be characterized to be misleading, impoverishing, and a cheat to the art history, and in particular to Ono's works. Ono's instructional pieces can be best described as ready-made visual objects, both in the imagination and in mind instead of being viewed as ready-made events or actions.⁴⁰

It can be insinuated that Ono's dedications to the conceptual art was given minimal significance since she was considered as a radical artists considering the fact that she was a Japanese female artist. During that period, neither women nor Asians were considered by the west to have a significant impact to the modernization history. With this background, it is more easily understood why Ono did not merit a critical and sustained analysis of her work and contributions.⁴¹ Amidst such a background, Anthony Cox's role in her life is highly appreciated since he made it possible for her interactive concepts to be followed by many people. The misleading notion that Yoko Ono was a mere companion of the great artists of her period should there be changed and the

³⁹ Ibid, 149.

⁴⁰ Nicolas Bourriaud, "Yoko Ono and Gentle Energy." In *Horizontal Memories*, ed. Grete Arbu, (Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 43.

⁴¹ Ibid.

historian scholars given the opportunity to portray her creativity and discernment to the society to give relevance to the art history.

Although a lot of Ono's works on conceptual statements were published in the 1960s, there are some of her works that range from 1952 and 1953. Among the published works in the early 1950s is the secret piece. Such work pre-dates the works of the so-considered comrades by a decade indicating the reason for the divergent concept found in her work different from those of the likes of Young and Brecht.⁴² Despite being oversimplified due to her association with her husband's reputation, her works indicate sharp isolation from the Cagean tradition and a further venture is also observed from her works. Ono, unlike other artists of the time, was not interested in learning about other people but was concerned about the direction she would take to ensure that her messages on the power, female identity and other relevant issues would reach her audience.

Ono, a well-established conceptual artist who many historians have given minimal attention, had succeeded in most of her performances despite experiencing many critics. She was seen as a bad example of womanhood and a husband snatcher by critics and a bad mother to her children. On the other hand, her association with the Cagean aesthetic is far from reality since she had the concept of Cagean aesthetic long before Cage began experimenting with his project. In the 1930s, in her early education period, Ono was enrolled in a good school that provided musical education to the students. Such institutions provided Ono with the necessary skills she needed in her musical career.⁴³

⁴² Alan Clayson, Barb Jungr, and Robb Johnson. *Woman: The Incredible Life of Yoko Ono*. (New Malden: Chrome Dreams, 2004).

⁴³ Kotz, 57

Ono's works are powerful both in provision for art language and ethical values. Her choices of words, for example, the use of 'painting' to describe her work, indicate her greater sense of visual art attraction than she had for musical art. It should also be remembered that her performance art has also gained recognition among male artists, since many were being re-performed by male artists. Her instrumental roles in emphasizing the need for men to free themselves from greed created by their desire to achieve ideal gender roles is so important that men are using the same concepts to ease their lives. Irrespective of the challenges set up by historian scholars trying to oversimplify Ono's works, she, through her same works, has demonstrated the need for a free and selfless society.⁴⁴

In addition to all these developments, Ono's role in establishing a new form of conceptual art could be approached from a different political perspective. The aftermath of the Second World War saw the world in constant fear of the threat of nuclear annihilation and the everyday violence experienced in Vietnam.⁴⁵ The period, especially in the 1960s and the 1970s, most artists were motivated to venture into the concept of destruction art as the survivor's discourse in which they passed the message to the world on the need for mental destruction to adopt new perspective.

The concept of destruction art became an ethical issue through which the dangers and effects of past wars and violence were depicted through artwork to enlighten the world on the adverse impacts they brought to the world's development.⁴⁶ By re-

⁴⁴ Danto, *Life in Fluxus*, 36.

⁴⁵ Alexandra Munroe and Jon Hendricks. *Yes Yoko Ono*. (New York: Japan Society, 2000).

⁴⁶ Michael Chladil, "Running to Stand Still: Class 1: Critique of 'Cut Piece' by Yoko Ono," *New York*

introducing them into the consciousness of the world, the artists believed that it would bring a change to the perception of the people about the future. Art production during this period became the best possible way through which the survival of the world was laid. The artists' concerns reflected not only through the body's conceptual works of violence or literal narrative performances but also by redefining the already existing social relations, art, consciousness, and hierarchical definitions.

Yoko Ono was among the artists who made use of this kind of destruction art to pass the required message to the world on the dangers of war, and address the place of women in the society. Through her works, Ono defied her contemporary art conventions and explored the concept of power by conveying it in both aesthetic and philosophical meaning.⁴⁷ Her address of destruction was made explicit through her conceptual performances, object modification and presentation and instruction. Her works were also feminist in nature, in addition to the conceptual artworks cultivations. Ono's concern on violence internalization and oppression demonstrated the feminist thought of the contemporary world, through which she conceives the body of a female as both a battleground and a text. Through her work of repositioning the violence in the performance, Ono was seen to be promoting a form of creative thinking by drawing out the destruction reality that had been hidden in the social and physical body.

University. http://itp.nyu.edu/~mjc497/weblog/2007/09/class_1_critique_of_cut_piece.html 2007 (Accessed July 21st 2014).

⁴⁷ Eiichiro Azuma, "Race, Citizenship, and the 'Science of Chick Sexing': The Politics of Racial Identity among Japanese Americans," *Pacific Historical Review*, 78 no. 2 (2009): 261.

FEMINIST ART

The Feminization of Society by Ono

Behind the feminist movement, the zeal to move on was never to get many women to employment, but to completely free women from a male dominated society. This liberation is not to be undertaken by women rebelling against men or finding a specific medium in which both male and female can experience happiness. Ono proposed a scenario in which from the already existing feminine and masculine characteristics, the women should create a feminine nature from the dominating masculine force.⁴⁸

Feminization of society as used by Ono implied putting the feminine nature into a positive aspect to transform the world. She called for the transformation of the world with a feminine awareness and intelligence, and making it into an organic and a non-competitive society built on love instead of reason. According to Ono, this will be a balanced society with tranquility and contentment. She further expounded that the fundamental change within a society is only brought into play when the parties involved evolve instead of revolting, feel instead of thinking, and seek unity rather than fighting for independence. Ono describes these characters as feminine and explains that they are despised in women by males.

One would rather ask whether these feminine characteristics have been avoided by men. In a real sense, Ono continued to explain that the problem has not always been with the male human species, but with the impatient nature of the people. Already, the world is experiencing the feminine nature at work from the empirical thoughts and

⁴⁸ Ono, 3.

intuitions being put to use instead of the ideologies and logistics. Other advanced communication fields like telepathy have been put to use indicating the rise of feminine climate at work.

Cut Piece

Among the most outstanding pieces that Ono performed was the *Cut Piece*. Through the *Cut Piece* performance, Yoko Ono tries to pass the message that reclamation of one's identity is an experience of totality instead of self-indulgent, singularly encapsulated, or fragmented situation. The choice of the performance empowered the already debilitating deconstructed process of the body to project the lessons to the society. The work created a scenario in which the audiences would not reclaim their identity at personal levels, but challenge any fixed opinion about their identities. The reaffirmed identities could be compared with the national or a cultural entity.

In her attempt to explore her potential and to achieve greater self in the society through her works, Yoko Ono used rituals in her performances.⁴⁹ During "Cut Piece," Ono was ritualistically stripped by her audience members, in which she exemplified a transpersonal period. This was demonstrated through her dramatic exposition that demonstrated no overt expression of physical violence. The intentional use of her body as a sacrifice helped fuse nature, body, and art. The ritualistic connotation of participating in the performance was an ego stripping that manifested a transpersonal period exemplified by empowering the self through a voluntary self-loss. The mechanism of performance

⁴⁹ Deborah Ultan, "From the Personal to the Transpersonal: Self Reclamation Through Ritual-in-Performance," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 20, no. 2 (2001): 30-36 .

was common in the sixties as a way of freedom expression particularly of the self and the body. This kind of aesthetic performance was later regarded as self-revelatory act through which the identity and the body could be reaffirmed. According to Ultan, “This process of self-inflicted disengagement, manipulation, humiliation, and critical evaluation was an essential part of the process of re-structuring a greater consciousness.”⁵⁰

The piece addresses gender issues so vividly, as her body started to be viewed as a sexual object. The stillness during the cutting process demonstrated her as an object, which has no say in what the world does to her. The interpretation in the cutting process referred to the fact that females had been perceived as objects and not subjects in their own worldviews. During that period, women were essentially seen as objects in the society and not as subjects who had crucial roles and decision-making processes to undertake. Her reactions in the video clip towards the end of the show demonstrated her uncomfortable nature with the way the sexually aggressive persons were becoming with her clothing and body.⁵¹

Cut Piece has a relationship with the work of Frueh that analyzes the body through the eyes of women. Frueh argues that the woman’s body should only be analyzed through the perspective of a woman since it deals with her anatomy. She says, “Idealizations of the female body reflect and enforce cultural desires about a woman’s beauty and sexuality, her social place and power.”⁵² Ono’s performance of *Cut Piece* was an indication of struggle for repossession of the body from the sexually hungry persons

⁵⁰ Ibid, 36.

⁵¹ Julian Bryan-Wilson, “Remember Yoko Ono’s ‘Cut Piece.’” *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no.1 (2003): 117.

⁵² Joanna Frueh, “The Body Through Women’s Eyes,” 190.

who viewed a woman's body as an object through which the subjects, and in this case, men, can use at their own pleasure. The struggle for body reclamation by women in the 1970s gained momentum, an indication that the ground had been laid by Ono in the 1960s. This was to salvage it from the people who had degraded it and reduced its significance in the society.

Ono, through her *Cut Piece* is also emphasized to the social place and power of a woman. The inactiveness during the cutting of her dress indicates how men have disregarded the social position of women as lower than theirs in the society. Specifically, the person who went so far as to cut her dress to expose her breasts was a man. By allowing her audience to participate in her performance, Ono invited her work to be part of the audience's work as demonstrated by Rich in his opinion that, "Yes, you can do this; this also belongs to you. Like government, art needs the participation of the many in order not to become the property of a powerful and narrowly self-interested few."⁵³ It could also be observed that her invitation of the audience to participate in the performance was a sign that the performance was not strictly hers but for society.

Most recently, however, *Cut Piece* has been seen as a largely feminist work.⁵⁴ In reviews of the performance, reviewers described Ono as seeming quite passive on the stage. One scholar believes that her motionlessness is symbolic, with her appearing to be "surrendering herself to the different reactions of an audience, the audience becoming a symbol of female passivity and vulnerability, while the latent potential for sexist and

⁵³ Adrienne Rich, "Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts" 103.

⁵⁴ Ono, 102.

racist violence and for a destructive desire becomes increasingly apparent.”⁵⁵ As Wilson stated, “By integrating Ono’s art into a broadly understood feminism, one that directs itself toward the circulation of the female body within global politics, the body in *Cut Piece* is not only gendered, but formed by nation, race, and history.”⁵⁶

In other words, the symbolism was high in that she was the figurative victim being “cut” by the dictates of dominance. *Cut Piece* has also been described as “fiercely feminist in content.”⁵⁷ She went on to explain that Ono might have been inspired by the legend of Buddha, “who had renounced his life of privilege to wander the world, giving whatever was asked of him.”⁵⁸ As stated by Ono, “I felt that this was my genuine contribution. This is how I really felt.”⁵⁹ She characterized her performance as a test of her commitment to life as an artist, as a challenge to the artistic ego.⁶⁰

Since *Cut Piece* was first staged in 1964, critics of all walks have given their opinions about this unique and highly recognized performance artwork. Some earlier accounts of the behaviors of the audience on the stage were observed to be “sexually aggressive.”⁶¹ However, it was not until 1991 when the book entitled *Yoko Ono: Objects and Arias* came out that the artwork was given a specifically feminist reading. Tanner lists the ‘serious issues’ that Ono confronts in *Cut Piece* as: “voyeurism, sexual aggression, gender subordination, violation of a woman’s personal space, violence

⁵⁵ Ibid, 76.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 103.

⁵⁷ Kevin Concannon, “Yoko Ono’s ‘Cut Piece’: From Text to Performance and Back Again,” 79.

⁵⁸ Steve Wilson, “Yoko Ono?” *Ultimate Metal*. <http://www.ultimatemetal.com/forum/opeth-archived/62607-steve-wilson-yoko-ono.html> (Accessed July 21st 2014).

⁵⁹ Concannon, “Yoko Ono’s ‘Cut Piece’: From Text to Performance and Back Again,” 88.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 89.

⁶¹ Ibid, 92.

against women.⁶² While giving his interpretation on the significance of the *Cut Piece* performance artwork, Wilson summarized it in the following manner:

In such instances, Ono's body is taken as a body stripped, scrutinized, motored by theories of feminine submission and masculine domination, implicate the audience in a series of escalating transactions, from voyeurism to physical harm, and present the audience as menacing, terroristic, and compassionless. There is little possibility in these interpretations that the invitation Ono proffers might be positive—no space for *Cut Piece* to be gift, a gesture of reparation, or a ritual of remembrance.⁶³

Wilson argued that the feminism approach is often of a limited scope and “turns Ono's piece into a lateralization of ‘undressing’ as violence to the female body.”⁶⁴ According to Latoya Peterson, *Cut Piece* is about self-awareness. She explains;

She felt that an Asian woman was seen as a dragon lady or an obedient slave—nothing in between the extremes. There were countless racist remarks in the press, especially after the breakup of the Beatles, but she has overcome it over many years. She has made a great contribution in changing the world's view of Asian women in general. She has consistently projected an image of a self-aware, confident, creative, and strong-willed woman.⁶⁵

Cut Piece was interpreted by Ono as “freeing yourself from yourself...”⁶⁶ But Ono brought up feminist issues in her other works. The song, *Woman is the Nigger of the World*, is a highly controversial one. Its lyrics contained a highly sensitive term that disparages African Americans. As will be discussed later, however, this term was used as a metaphor and not to disparage.

Ono's *Cut Piece* is classified as feminist because it seriously addresses issues touching on gender subordination, sexual aggression, and violence against women,

⁶² Steve Wilson, “Yoko Ono?” 103.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Yoko Ono, 76.

sexual aggression and the violation of the space of women.⁶⁷ However, the work also seems ambiguous since the interpretation of the script has been left to the analysts' perspective since the main performer is silent during the performance.⁶⁸ Her performance is purely demonstrative inviting the audience and the art scholars to make their own interpretation.

It was conceived by the latter feminists art historians that Ono's *Cut Piece* artwork could only gain its feministic worldview once it was performed by a female, something that did not come from the piece's original artist herself. There was also a strongly held emphasis that by allowing the original performer and the original audience participate in the art gave the art some authentic nature. However, this is not the case since the recent performers of this *Cut Piece* including the men have maintained Ono's score. Although the original performers carrying out the artwork would be of some significance to the art literature, the significant lesson that should be maintained is the content and the information carried in the performance. The performing gender should not be a factor in categorizing the feministic nature of an artwork.

“Women as the Nigger of the World “

Ono's first song, *The Woman as the Nigger of the World*, has ignited criticism and praise in equal measures across the globe. The most surprising thing is that the song was well received by African Americans. The song that was written with the help of Lennon had a description of male chauvinism and all other odd things that male-

⁶⁷ Ibid, 76.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 78.

dominated societies did to women. Although the song received the lowest rating on the Billboard with being number fifty seven out of the top a hundred songs, experts say that it was not racist but used the pejorative *nigger* to pass its message. Among the top political class to have been impacted by this song was an African-American Congressman by the name of Ron Dellums, who in his reaction commented, “if one is to define a nigger as someone’s lifestyle as whose opportunities and opportunity roles are defined by others, then good news is that one does not have to be black to be a nigger. In the American society, most are niggers.”⁶⁹

The use of the term ‘nigger’ did not indicate racism but was a metaphor that indicated the long suppression of womanhood in the societies. Despite the criticisms that the song received from every corner of the world, it was hailed as one of the fundamental voices of the feminist rights. The feminist view was expressed by the manner in which the two artists, that is, Ono and Lennon, lament on how a woman was treated in the society.

The catching phrase of the song that explicitly demonstrated a cry for a woman is indicated in the following line: “We make her bear and raise our children, and then we leave her flat for being a fat old mother hen. We tell her, home is the only place she should be, and then we complain that she's too unworldly to be our friend.”⁷⁰ The sharp contrast demonstrated in the song showed the untruthfulness and hypocrisy of men as it continues to state, “While putting her down we pretend that she's above us.”⁷¹ The

⁶⁹ (You Tube. “John Lennon-Woman is the “N” of the World.” Online video clip. 2007)

⁷⁰ Ono, 47.

⁷¹ Ibid, 48.

motivating principle behind the song's writing was to invite men to help women with roles in the society. There was no defined place where a woman was supposed to stay while men are to stay in another place. The effort placed in the song had a large impact on the society since some men begun engaging themselves in house chores to help their women with duty.

Woman is the Nigger of the World

Woman is the nigger of the world

Yes, she is, think about it

Woman is the nigger of the world

Think about it, do something about it

We make her paint her face and dance

If she won't be a slave, we say that she don't love us

If she's real, we say she's trying to be a man

While puttin' her down we pretend that she's above us

Woman is the nigger of the world, yes she is

If you don't believe me, take a look at the one you're with

Woman is the slave to the slaves

Ah, yeh, better scream about it

We make her bear and raise our children

And then we leave her flat for being a fat old mother hen

We tell her, home is the only place she should be

Then we complain that she's too unworldly to be our friend

Woman is the nigger of the world, yeah, she is
If you don't believe me, take a look at the one you're with
Woman is the slave to the slaves
Yeh (think about it)
We insult her every day on TV
And wonder why she has no guts or confidence
When she's young we kill her will to be free
While telling her not to be so smart we put her down for being so dumb
Woman is the nigger of the world
Yes, she is, if you don't believe me, take a look at the one you're with
Woman is the slave to the slaves
Yes, she is, if you believe me, you better scream about it.

What led Ono to write the lyrics for this song? One experience in particular played a significant role. The Beatles were highly influential at the time, and when they had gatherings, “The men stayed in the sitting-room while the wives were cramped in the kitchen. It was only Lennon who invited her to join the group, while all the other girls stayed in the kitchen. Ono shifted back and forth a few times, frequently returning to the kitchen where she should have stayed.”⁷² This experience made her realize that women were like the “niggers” of this world, merely slaves. The idea for her song gradually took shape, and she ended up coining the phrase in 1969. Lennon, who had been affected by Ono’s ideas since 1968, was totally touched by her efforts. Therefore, he created a song

⁷² Jerry Hopkins, *Yoko Ono*, 67.

in favor of feminist rights along with Ono despite knowing that such songs would not necessarily bring him fame. He felt it was his duty to do so. Ono had realized that for the women's liberation movement to be successful, men had to participate. Men played a role in such fields as reproduction, reproductive health, psychological intervention, sharing of the domestic chores, and fighting against domestic violence and education. The lyrics later argued sexism in the media: "We insult her every day on TV."⁷³ Ono indicted that, as a female and a colored woman in the West, she had been abused by the mass media; during the early years of her career, her relationship with Lennon got her more attention from the public than her conceptual and experimental art pieces had.

"Sisters, O Sisters"

The second song of Ono that displayed her feministic tendencies was "Sisters, O Sisters." This was in honor of her suppressed sisters. The song came when Ono was at the peak of her feministic advocacy. Despite coming from her particular background and having been married to Lennon, Ono still experienced challenges as an Asian woman as a result of her gender and race from society. Ono felt being considered an alien both in the western countries and in her own country of Japan. In her country of origin, the headlines referred to her as a foreigner despite having blood connection with Japan.⁷⁴ Faced with myriad challenges from both the moral and social perspectives, everything appeared unjust for Ono. Having noticed that the woman's world appeared so indifferent with the oppression tendencies from the male dominated society, she felt the need to awaken the women and to make them realized their place in the society.

⁷³ Ibid, 59.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 91.

To her dismay, the female world seemed so indifferent to the oppression they faced. She felt she needed to wake them up through her art. As Ono stated, “This society is the very society that killed female freedom: the society that was built on female slavery.”⁷⁵ Therefore, she called on women around the globe to fight against the tyranny brought about by male dominance. She emphasized that in order for females to wake up, being informed was critical. Women around the world must learn to ask questions about their fate and then do something concrete to change the situation. It is their duty to build a new world with equality.

Ono’s intention in the song was to strengthen the sisterhood concept among the women to motivate them to fight for each other’s’ space in the society. The sisterhood concept held that women were to be united irrespective of their background, race, of sexual orientation. The principal belief was that with the unity they were fighting for, nothing could come their way to prevent them from achieving their goals. Ono believed that it was only the women who were to change the mindset of the society and not the society changing itself. She thus argued, “The ultimate goal of female liberation is not just to escape from male oppression.”⁷⁶ Her argument was that running a society with a feminist concept would create balance, contentment, and peace in society. The lyrics follow.

Sister O Sister

⁷⁵ Ono, 79.

⁷⁶ Ibid ,65.

We lost our green land
We lost our clean air
We lost our true wisdom
And we live in despair
O sisters, O sisters
Let's stand up right now
It's never too late
To start from the start
O wisdom, O wisdom
That's what we ask for
And yes, my dear sisters
We must learn to ask
O wisdom, O wisdom
That's what we ask for
That's what we live for now
O wisdom, O wisdom
That's what we ask for
That's what we live for now
O sisters, O sisters
Let's wake up right on
It's never too late
To shout from our hearts

O freedom, O freedom
That's what we fight for
And yes, my dear sisters
We must learn to fight
Freedom, O freedom
That's what we ask for
That's what we live for now
Freedom, O freedom
That's what we ask for
That's what we live for now
O sisters, O sisters
Let's give up no more
It's never too late
To build a new world
New world, O new world
That's what we live for

Some women waited for society to make changes, even if they want to be liberated. But Ono warned them with the following:

Most of us, as women, hope that we can achieve our freedom within the existing social set-up, thinking that, somewhere, there must be a happy medium for men and women to share freedom and responsibility. But if we just took the time to observe the very function of our society, the greed-power-frustration syndrome, we would soon see that there is no happy medium to be achieved.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Consequently, as she saw it, there is no way society will change itself; women must make the changes. She stated, “The ultimate goal of female liberation is not just to escape from male oppression.” She believed women must wake up and resort to some concrete measures to make the world change its attitude toward them. She even advocated for running society with a feminist direction. She believed that “The result will be a society of balance, peace, and contentment.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Ibid.

TRANSNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINISM

Having lived a significant amount of time in the US, Ono, Japanese by origin, could have received a lot of feminist influence in the US versus in Japan. Coming from a conservative background in Japan, Ono gained her experience in the Feminist Art Movement through her frequent visits in art galleries and museums. Her background also constituted the many challenges she experienced in her career. Promoting a concept that was disregarded and marginalized by the American male-dominated society, she received many insults from men behind her back with others referring to her as a bitch.⁷⁹

Japanese culture was also considered conservative regarding the defined roles of women in society. It is from the influence of the American Women Liberation Movement feminism was facilitated in the Japanese culture. The feminist art works and their proponents like Ono had promoted a peaceful evolution of the societal concept in which a feminine nature was to be allowed to emerge without conflicts with the social structures in place. This later sharply contrasted what later feminists have been promoting as a liberation strategy from men. The later years saw the role of American women change in the society. The feminist movement was involved in creating more job opportunities for women and promoting shared family roles in which men also take part.⁸⁰

The extent to which social barriers within American society were manipulated to accommodate the female roles in the society led to an elevation of women's status. In addition to creating laws and regulations that allowed expanded emancipation of

⁷⁹ Martha A. Bari, "Mass media: Yoko Ono and John Lennon's 1969 year of peace" (Doctoral dissertation, Name of University, 2008).

⁸⁰ Eiichiro Azuma, "Race, citizenship, and the science of chick sexing," 247.

American female roles, some elements cropped in that went to the extreme. One major act that the feminism was contributed to is the rise of lesbianism. Women have embraced this lifestyle as a revolt to then dominant concept that a woman depended on a male for her emotional and relationship needs. This, however, is not what the like of Yoko Ono advocated for as theirs was a peaceful coexistence that was to be nurtured to grow.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the subsequent generation of women have found the efforts made by the feminists worth because there has been increased participation of women in the social decision making.⁸²

Ono's artworks were not contextualized as Asian American based on her background⁸³ until recently. It has been observed that most of the artists with an Asian American background do not identify their works or themselves with their roots. According Rubin and Casper, "attempts to contextualize oneself or one's work as Asian American often leads to the marginalization or dismissal of work created by artists of Asian origin."⁸⁴ The argument, however, seemed inadequate as it is in history that most of the full American female artists received rejection and discrimination both from the mainstream scene and the media since 1960s and 1970s.

The Gender Ideologies in Japan

Traditionally, motherhood in Japan has been characterized by submission or self-sacrifice in the service of husbands and the upkeep of children. This background helps

⁸¹ Ono, 3.

⁸² Alexandra Munroe and Jon Hendricks, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 325.

⁸³ Joan Rubin and Scott E. Casper, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 90.

explain why an American novel, *Little Women*, captivated so many Japanese women. During World War II, the Japanese government vigorously promoted their good wife and wise mother” campaign with the aim of having the whole nation united in the war efforts of the so-called “Great Asia Ring of Co-prosperity of Greater East Asia.”⁸⁵ Therefore, most Japanese women had been taught to be submissive in their marital lives and serve their familial interests and their husbands willingly. However, the influence brought about by feminist movement from the United States to Japan introduced a threat to this long outstanding cultural view. There was a link between Ono’s approaches to the feminist artwork compared to the full Americans perspectives. Her approach was of smooth coexistence in which the feminine nature is left to grow by itself. In it is creation of an attitude in which intuition rules and not reason. Ono believed that societal inequalities and beliefs will eventually be changed depending on the approach taken to let it develop.⁸⁶

The historical fact that has been held for many years was that the Japanese women were a beacon of devotion and self-sacrifice to their families. The cosmos song was a reflection of maternal affection to both the entire family and to the children in particular. The song demonstrated an awakening reminder of conscious to the traditional Japanese woman on her need for sacrifice to the family.⁸⁷ Having been sung by a popular Japanese actress and shown on the national television, the song was a call for a Japanese woman never to denounce the special character that they were associated with in the global

⁸⁵ Jerry Hopkins, *Yoko Ono*, 61.

⁸⁶ Ono, 3

⁸⁷ Eric Woodrum, “An Assessment of Japanese American Assimilation, Pluralism, and Subordination,” *American Journal of Sociology* 87 (1981): 129.

sphere. The song was instrumental in reminding the women of the significance of their gender in the society and why they should live it fully to satisfaction.

Japanese Feminist Movement

The Japanese feminist movement occurred parallel in time to the America's feminist movement. Although there is the perception that the Japanese feminist movement was independent of the America's, it cannot be denied that Yoko with her transnational identity performed in both movements.⁸⁸ Yoko particularly intended her song *Woman Power* for the Japanese feminist movement. For that reason, the Japanese feminist movement is relevant in this discussion as it highlights the wider influence Yoko left with her performances.

In both Japan and America, society experienced tremendous changes in its economic, political, and social aspects after the Second World War. This saw women's roles expanding from a secluded family-based existence to an outside context. At the peak of the feminist movement, there were rigorous changes as well in the Japanese society. There was a call from the feminist movement inviting Japanese women to rethink their beliefs on most of their cultural concepts, specifically motherhood concept and roles, women's position in the society, and the definition concept of femininity and sexuality. This push for a liberal concept created a sober avenue through which women's roles were redefined and these changes were included in the new Japanese constitution with the help of the government of the United States.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 127.

The provision guaranteed the rights of women in employment and marriage.⁸⁹ It is worth noting that the created provisions in the new Japanese constitution also created room in the political dimensions for the Japanese women. Affirmative action was introduced that determined how women would be chosen in the political boards. This was a significant development in the both the political spheres and the women world.

Despite the numerous changes witnessed in the Japanese culture after the feminist movement, many women were still sober enough to incorporate their traditional roles of motherhood with their career fields. “Changes were made in the economic world that embraced the participation of women in the career world but did not distant them from their traditional roles except a few.”⁹⁰

“Woman Power”: A Symbolic Figure in Contemporary Feminism

The motivating principle from which the lyric of the song was written comes from the rich background that Ono had. Her artistic orientation had been perceived as radical by many critics. Moreover, her artistic performance is one that requires viewers’ involvement. According to Ono, women were perceived as witches with magical abilities. The wizard, who is the male version of a witch, is revered and respected with equal measures. Ono encouraged a change in approach from a male chauvinistic society that was evident in her time to a more sober driven by feminine attitude. In her arguments of the Japanese feminist, Ono insisted that both males and females are magical beings that need equal respect and reverence.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Ono had a pursuit for an environment in which women will be the masters of their own fate and take responsibility for their actions.⁹¹ “Ono believes women are superlative on par with witches and she wants women to explore their own magic powers she dreams of a ‘woman nation’ which she believes is coming soon.”⁹² Her argument was that people should stop the opinion that such a nation was only possible beyond the horizons of the sky.

Ono’s lyrics attempted to liberate women by calling on them to break away from the tyranny of male dominance and gain their gender equality and freedom. Maybe Ono thought women had been suppressed so long by the male-dominated world that she wanted to unleash the female power or “supremacy” that had been hidden for so long. In the lyrics to her song *Women Power*, we can feel the pulsating surge of a woman who is fearless and unyielding, and who demands change from the male-dominated world that suppressed her for so many years. She anticipates the arrival of a time when the world is no longer dominated by so-called “man power” but by “woman power.”⁹³

From her experiences of living and performing with John Lennon and his band, we can imagine that her vision of a female-dominated world would be more peaceful. This may be especially true in a nation like Japan, where women have been submissive to their husbands and confined to homemaking and child care roles for generations. This may explain why the song was so influential in Japan. It can be seen that the ideals enveloped in the lyrics of this song have greatly impacted the feminist movements both in

⁹¹ Ono, 79-80.

⁹² Kevin Concannon, “Yoko Ono’s ‘Cut Piece,’” 89.

⁹³ Ibid.

the West and in Japan as well. This is an interesting phenomenon, for these concepts and ideals were made possible by nothing but pop culture, which would seem to be a poor manner of delivering such an important message. But Ono's music did manage to disseminate feminist ideals and concepts, and helped raise the awareness of women's consciousness of the women's liberation movement.⁹⁴ The lyrics read:

You've heard of woman nation
Well, that's coming, baby
What we need is the power of trust
Its coming
You've heard of the law of selection
That's how were gonna do it, baby
We allow men who wanna join us
The rest can just stay by themselves

Woman power (repeat 3x)

Two thousand years of male society
Laying fear and tyranny
Seeking grades and money
Clinging to values vain and phony
Woman power (repeat 3x)
Do you know that one day you lost your way, man?
Do you know that someday you have to pay, man?
Have you anything to say, man
Except, "Make no mistake about it, I'm the president, you hear?"
I want to make one thing clear, I'm the president, you hear?"
Woman power

Issues Emerging from the Extant Literature

The significance of Yoko was demonstrated much in the manner with which Lennon handled her, so different from the other women. It could be that Lennon saw in Ono a soul mate and his own reflection. In simple terms, Lennon could have attributed Ono as an intellectual equal. One can only assume why there existed a special

⁹⁴ Eric Woodrum, "An Assessment of Japanese American Assimilation," 164.

relationship between these great artists. Many scholars have postulated several assumptions as to why Lennon could have considered Ono as his equal. First, it could have been that Ono was not ready to accept the shit that Lennon had dumped on his ex-wife, Cynthia.⁹⁵ It could also be said that Lennon needed an assertive woman who was very strong and principled unlike his mother. Others could still assume that Lennon was just mature enough and was looking for a woman that he could grow old with and considering the fact that Ono seemed to fulfill his character, he decided to marry her.⁹⁶

Despite being very strict with who was allowed to be in the studio while The Beatles were recording, there was a surprise turn of events when John allowed Ono to attend with the group and record. Spitz in his emphasis for those who were to be allowed in the studio quoted McCartney as saying, “four miners who go down the pit . . . you don’t need women down the pit, do you?”⁹⁷ Yoko’s presence in the studio, as reported by Kotz, similarly featured as a key component of the history that she has made:

Yoko’s appearance in the studio functioned as a declaration of war. John knew the bombshell he’d drop by pulling such an aggressive stunt, and he seemed perfectly willing to light the fuse. The look on his face “dared the others” to say the wrong word. He almost longed for the opportunity to stage a showdown. Of course, at that very moment, someone should have stood up to him. Someone should have taken John aside and ordered him to get his act together. Someone should have demanded that Yoko leave the studio immediately. Someone should have laid down the law. Incredibly, however, no one did a thing. The other Beatles pretended that nothing unusual had occurred. Inside, they seethed and cut one another tense glance, furious at the intrusion but reluctant to confront John.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Kotz, 67.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 72.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 73.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 74-75.

From Lennon's point of view, Yoko was not any ordinary woman who needed to be in the house and wait for the husband to come home and perform her house chores. She was a talented musician who needed to be provided with the necessary environment to exploit her talents. It should be observed that the Beatle's rejection of Ono was not because she was not talented in music but because she was a woman who wanted to use the band for her feministic role. During his interview, Lennon admitted that they would have never treated any other musician in the manner at which they did with Ono.⁹⁹ Paul and George would loudly express their disappointments of having Ono present in the studio. Lennon's disappointment was at the manner with which the Beatle group members ignored Ono's presence at the studio without giving any explanation for her rejection.

The fact remains that Yoko made contributions to both the conceptual art field and the musical work. Ono's reference for her works as unfinished paintings had a lot of significance to her need for inviting her audience to participate in her performance. She did this by recasting her arts from finished objects to the unfinished process in which the finishing process was to be done by the audience. Ono introduced a new kind of art work different from the traditional concept in which the artists would perform a piece of art and finally make the interpretations for the audience.¹⁰⁰ This was considered an improvement to the art world since instead of creating a distinction between the audience and the performer, the two parties were getting involved in art and making interpretations for themselves.

⁹⁹ Fluxus. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 65.

¹⁰⁰ Lawrence Alloway, "Art as Words as Art." 189.

The traditional environment for art and music according to Ono's perspective seemed to create a boundary between the artists and the audience. The audience participation on the performers' work was minimal if not zero, as the audiences were expected to take a back seat and watch. Such a perception had made many audiences to critique her way of performance insisting that it was not the ethics of performing.¹⁰¹ The public opinion of that time was that the creation and performance of an artwork was solely left to the artist and not the audience. Audience participation, however, seemed innate to Ono. Her worldview was developed through her experience as a war child who had lived and experienced World War II. The experience made her conceive a transient form of performance and not static in which changes were unavoidable.

Having learned to accept the uncontrollable factors of chance and change through experience, Ono had a mature and distinct attitude towards art in which its development was attained through public participation. Despite having difficulties during her early performances period with the manner of providing instructions, Ono's persistence in her duty made the system to be embraced by her audiences, her work incorporated the talents of her audiences.¹⁰²

Scholars have also demonstrated the fact that Ono did not place her attention on the instructional paintings to be viewed as a physical object, whether being considered as a realized work or the text itself. They hold that Ono's emphasis was majorly placed on the immaterial possibility of an object of which the audience were to deduce. It could also be noted that the conceptual application of language as a medium of art promoted the

¹⁰¹ Danto, "Life in Fluxus, 37.

¹⁰² Erica-Lynn Huberty, "Art as Creative Dialogue," 44.

withdrawal from sensible, visual and the material dimension of art. On the other hand, Ono's paintings provided an opportunity for the possibility of rendering of visual objects to perfection.

The process of bringing a physical object into existence by Yoko indicated the permanence of the object, thereby providing both its interpretive aspect and material dimension to the audience. Ono had a negative opinion about the use of monuments since it stayed in a particular place forever without providing any changing elements. Through unfinished paintings, Ono provided an opportunity for her audience to engage their minds in the art in order to come up with the full realization of the concept being presented.¹⁰³ This tapped the unconscious layer of a person and helped it wake up. As can be observed in the present world, Ono's artistic skills are being recycled each day in the art world with her skills being reintroduced into the society. Irrespective of the approach that Ono's work took and will take in the future, Yoshimoto writes, "it is always intended to become a catalyst of exchange between her and her audience."¹⁰⁴ In addition, transformation and communication are basic tools through which one's art can grow.

¹⁰³ Thomas Kellein, "Coughing is a form of love," 155.

¹⁰⁴ Midori Yoshimoto, "The Message Is the Medium: The Communication Art of Yoko Ono," *In Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*, ed. Name (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 110.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

In chapter one of this study, five research objectives were set to guide the study. After a comprehensive review of literature using the methodology outlined in the section of the literature review, this chapter gives a brief on how the study responded to the set objectives.

Research Objective 1: To discuss Yoko Ono's background and how her background has contributed to her Feminist Art Movement activism.

In response to this study objective, the reviewed sources reveal that Yoko Ono attended good educational institutions that prepared her for her future role. In addition, Ono's alienation as a youth contributed to her development and love for education and artistic work. Her parents' unconventional manner of delegating jobs, denial, and segregation from her father helped her to be objective of the world. Born in Japan and brought up partly in the US and partly in Japan, Ono was able to diagnose the treatment of women in the two different cultures. Ono's marriage to Lennon considerably contributed to the development of her career as an artist, and later as an activist. Lennon being an artist motivated Ono and supported her through her Feminist Art Movement. The study therefore extensively discusses Yoko Ono's background which contributed to her important role in the Feminist Art Movement.

Research Objective 2: To explore the literature gap and under discussion of Yoko Ono within the extant literature.

In the second objective, the review revealed the significance of Ono's artistic work in relationship to feminist movements and in giving guidance to the contemporary art world. However, the literature review demonstrates that Yoko Ono's contribution to the Feminist Art Movement was little appreciated. A section of the literature suggests that poor recognition of Ono's contributory work may be as a result of her associative work with Lennon, which overshadowed her achievements. A section of the literature opines that Ono's contribution might have been overlooked because she was considered a radical artist, and due to the fact that she is a Japanese female artist. Her dedications were made at a time when the west underrated educational contributions of Asians, particularly when they were women. In brief, the reviewed literature satisfactorily responds to the second research objective.

Research Objective 3: To understand Yoko Ono's contributions to feminist work movements.

According to the literature in previous section of the study report, Yoko Ono contributed significantly to the feminization of the society. Ono's artistic works were intended to free women from the masculine dominated society. Ono advocated for the transformation of the world with a feminine awareness and intelligence, and turning it into an organic and a non-competitive society built on love instead of reason. Through her popular *Cut Piece* performance, Ono demonstrated to feminine community the empowering of self through voluntary self-loss. *Cut Piece* has been largely viewed as a feminist work. The review also considered Ono's first song (*The Woman As The Nigger of the World*), which ignited criticism and praise across the globe. The song highlighted

male chauvinism and other injustices that women were subjected to in the then society. The second song, similarly discussed in this study, exposed how the female world seemed indifferent to the women, accusing society of having killed the female freedom. The literature review in previous section highlights Ono's contributions to feminist work movements, responding to the third research question.

Research Objective 4: To evaluate Yoko Ono's role in transnational development of feminism.

This section of the study sought to demonstrate Ono's role in transnational development of feminism. Ono is transnational in that she is of Japanese descent but has more influence in the US than Japan due to her longer stay in the US. It is from the American Women's Liberation Movement, of which Ono was part, that feminism was facilitated in Japan. Ono performed in both America and Japan (and other parts of the world), facilitating transnational feminism.

Research Objective 5: To present Yoko Ono as a symbolic figure in contemporary feminism.

Ono's history showed her pursuing an environment in which women are masters of their own destiny and take responsibility for their own actions. Her lyrics attempt to liberate women by calling on them to break away from the tyranny of male dominance to gain gender equality and freedom. Most of the feminist ideas given by Ono during her performances are clearly evident in the contemporary society. The study has consequently demonstrated Ono as a symbolic figure in the contemporary feminism.

Recommendation

The current study findings and review are largely considered to be successful as they reveal the significance of Yoko Ono to the Feminist Art Movement. The revelation of Ono's contributions to the Feminist Art Movement should act as motivation to contemporary female artists to continue advocating for the liberation of women from male domination. Despite this perceived success, there are a few recommendations to be taken into consideration for similar studies in future. In order for the research to be more objective, future studies on similar topic should be based on qualitative research methodologies in addition to the review of literature. Such studies should seek to interview persons who have important and relevant information with regards to Feminist Art Movement. Attempts should be made to interview those who are closer to Ono or the feminist art specialists using qualitative research instruments and analyze the research results.

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