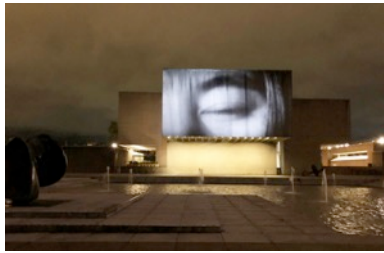


HYPERALLERGIC



Yoko Ono, "Eyeblink (Fluxfilm no. 9)" (1966), 16mm black-and-white silent film, projected on the I.M. Pei-designed Everson Museum building, Syracuse, New York, October 2019 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

SYRACUSE, New York — Could it be that some of the themes of Yoko Ono's work, from a career that has spanned more than six decades, feel more relevant, resonant, and urgent than ever?

This is one of the unexpected questions posed by *Yoko Ono: Remembering the Future*, a mini-retrospective of the now 86-year-old artist's work in various forms and media, which is on view through October 27 at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York. As its title suggests, this is an exhibition that looks back to look ahead.

Organized by D.J. Hellerman, the curator of art and programs at the museum, in collaboration with Jon Hendricks, Ono's longtime exhibitions director and a specialist in the history of Fluxus, *Yoko Ono: Remembering the Future* proves that after a long career marked by big milestones, like the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion lifetime-achievement award in 2009, her art's messages have not run out of steam.

The Everson Museum's presentation is part of a celebration of its 50th anniversary at its current location in downtown Syracuse, where it is housed in a chunky, poured-concrete structure designed by the late I.M. Pei. Once described as "a work of art for works of art," the Everson was the architect's first-ever museum project. For the current exhibition, one of the building's exterior walls has become a screen for nighttime projections of Ono's experimental films from the 1960s.



"Yoko Ono: Remembering the Future" at the Everson Museum, installation view: from left to right: "Dream" (1999/2019), black pigment on white-gesso-primed linen canvas, with wooden stretchers; "Morning Beams" (1997/2019), 100 nylon ropes emanating from a single source in the ceiling, suspended from top to bottom,

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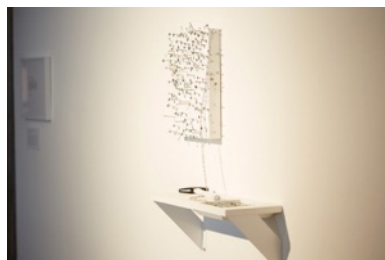
anchored in concentric circles, with metal plates and artist's written text; and framed facsimile pages of the first edition of Ono's book *Grapefruit*, (1964/2015); (photo by Bill Westmoreland for Hyperallergic)

Evincing something of a valedictory air, *Yoko Ono: Remembering the Future* also emphatically points back to *This is Not Here*, Ono's first-ever museum exhibition, which the Everson presented in 1971. On that occasion, Ono's husband, John Lennon, was billed as the show's "guest artist." Several other artists who, like Ono, had been involved with Fluxus, also contributed to that exhibition, which attracted considerable media attention, thanks to Lennon and Ono's celebrity.

Ono's art was then regarded — or, more precisely, portrayed — as incomprehensible and provocative. Nevertheless, Jim Harithas, the Everson's director at the time, seized upon everything unconventional about its idealistic, participatory, ephemeral nature, and readied his staff for the inevitable media circus that would come with the arrival of a former Beatle and his art-making wife. *This is Not Here* opened on October 9, 1971, Lennon's 31st birthday and the release date, in the United States, of his *Imagine* album. *Fly*, Ono's companion record, would be issued a few weeks later.

By inviting Ono and Lennon to his museum, Harithas established the Everson as an enthusiastic outpost for conceptual art. For a few years, it maintained a certain visibility and reputation for its embrace of cutting-edge art forms before falling back into a more traditional programming groove. Harithas left, and, later, the Everson wrestled with serious financial and staffing challenges.

Looking back on her first Everson show, Ono told Syracuse University's newspaper, the *Daily Orange*, in 2011, "It was very sweet of [Harithas] to take a chance on me." She added, "Harithas is an activist who believes in revolution. My show was a revolution!"



Yoko Ono, "Painting to Hammer a Nail" (1961/1966-2019), painted wood panel, metal nails, painted hammer, chain, and artist's written text (photo by Bill Westmoreland for Hyperallergic)

Many of the works in *This is Not Here* took their cues from the text-based, instructional pieces Ono had compiled in *Grapefruit*, a book she had first published in a limited edition in 1964, and invited viewers to complete their premises by imagining how they might be executed or by actively touching, handling, or walking through objects the artist had created. ("This is an unfinished show," Ono remarked at a museum press conference before the 1971 exhibition opened.)

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Similarly, "EN TRANCE" (1990/2019), one of the works in *Yoko Ono: Remembering the Future*, invites visitors to make their way through one of several different openings — a string curtain, a slide leading down to a knee-high hole, a narrow passageway — in order to enter the exhibition's first gallery. Elsewhere, museumgoers are asked to hammer actual nails into the wooden surface of "Painting to Hammer a Nail" (1961/1966-2019), or to sit down for a game of chess in "Play It By Trust" (1966/2019) — chess boards whose squares and movable pieces are all painted white.

Some of Ono's familiar, older works are on view, too, including "9 Concert Pieces for John Cage" (1961-1966), a set of handwritten, instructional "scores." One such score is "Hide Piece," from 1961, which simply states, "Hide." Another, "Promise Piece," from 1966, says only, "Promise." Ono annotates each piece with a description of its first performance, noting where it had taken place. For example, she first interpreted "Promise Piece" herself in 1966 at a theater in London, where she broke a vase onstage and offered its shards as keepsakes to audience members, asking them to promise to reunite in 10 years' time to put the shattered vessel back together again.



Yoko Ono, "Play It by Trust" (1966/2019, detail), seven white-painted tables, 14 chairs, seven complete chess sets with all-white pieces, and artist's written text (photo by Bill Westmoreland for Hyperallergic)

Other early works are presented in up-to-date iterations, such as "Sky TV" (1966-2019), a closed-circuit television — today, a sleek, wall-mounted, flat-screen monitor, not an old-style cathode-ray tube — which shows a live transmission of a view of the sky above the museum building.

"Mend Piece" (1966/2019) invites visitors to repair broken pieces of pottery using scraps of ceramics manufactured by the now-defunct Syracuse China Corporation, while "Water Event" (1971/2019), a collaborative effort that was originally undertaken for Ono's earlier Everson show, offers an example of Ono collaborating with other artists, asking them to create or propose ideas for water-holding vessels, for which Ono would provide the imaginary water.

In the current exhibition, the multimedia artist Beverly Semmes offers a hand-shaped, white-clay teacup resting on a bed of fur (Surrealist Meret Oppenheim's famous fur-lined cup, deconstructed), while Sheila Pepe, an artist whose work in various media often addresses feminist and class-related themes, presents a stack of big, bright-blue sponges.

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Since the very beginning of her work as an artist and composer, when Ono, still a student at Sarah Lawrence College, sought a way to notate birdsong, references to vivid natural forces and phenomena have figured prominently in her art and music. Water and oceans have been two of them, along with the sky, wind, and earth, and the wonders of growth and transformation.



Yoko Ono, "Add Color (Refugee Boat)" (1960/2016-2019), boat, water-based paint (ultramarine blue, sea blue, white), and artist's written text (photo by Bill Westmoreland for Hyperallergic)

At the Everson, several updated pieces pack a timely punch. "Three Mounds," which Ono first executed in 1999 using rocks from three towns in Israel, now consists of three piles of brown dirt labeled "Women subjected to domestic violence," "Women forced into madhouse," and "Women victims of elder abuse." "Add Color (Refugee Boat)" has its roots in Ono's "Add Color Painting," which she first presented during the winter of 1960-61. Encouraged by its title, visitors to the Everson have covered this participatory work, consisting of an actual rowboat inside an empty space, with doodles and graffiti, many expressing sympathy for the plight of refugees.

By far, the most potent piece on view is "Arising," a mixed-media installation Ono first presented in Venice, Italy, in 2013. It features a video projection of plaster casts made from women's naked bodies strewn like so much refuse on a bed of twigs, while cast-off clothes are piled up nearby, and written testimonials of abuse suffered by women from around the world line the wall — painful recollections submitted to the artist via social media, along with photos showing only their authors' eyes.

One woman's testimonial states, "Thrown down the stairs and then beaten for trying to protect my child from my husband. It made me stronger." Another contributor recalls her father's "misogynistic rants" and how he degraded her mother as "a stupid woman." She writes, "I took this violent propaganda into myself and blamed myself [...] learning to unconsciously hate myself as a girl."

Ono's anthem-like composition "Rising," from her 1995 record album of the same name, plays as a soundtrack to this piece. Over a swelling, two-chord riff, she offers a rousing call to self-healing, self-empowering action: "Follow your heart. Use your intuition. Make your manifestation. There's no confusion. Have courage. Have rage. We're rising."

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Yoko Ono, undated drawing from the "Franklin Summer" series (1994-2006, detail), ink on paper, 6 7/8 x 4 9/16 inches (photo by Bill Westmoreland for Hyperallergic)

When "Arising" was first shown in 2013, Ono told an interviewer, "I am a woman, and my experiences produce my works. That is why many of my works concern women and their condition. To me, feminism should be about understanding the women and their condition, about expressing who they are and what happened to them. If you put it this way, you see how feminism does not concern only women, but everybody as humans. Also men."

Which impulse is stronger in Ono's art: an unshakable sense of humanism and optimism (that, for her detractors, comes across as naïf or saccharine), or a radical, fundamentally political challenge, wrapped in poetic-philosophical propositions, not only to imagine a better, safer, non-violent world, but also to insist that it is achievable?

The tension between these different strains in Ono's art, along with an alternating current of playfulness and earnestness that courses through many parts of her multifaceted oeuvre, combine to deliver its peculiar, compelling, inviting-disquieting edge.

At the press conference for her 1971 Everson show, Ono said of her then still unfamiliar work, "You're not just watching it. You're going to be involved in it. [...] I believe in communicating in the sense of allowing other people to have direct experience with a piece. At the same time, I don't believe only in communicating at a conscious level, because subconsciously, everybody is communicating, whether you like it or not."

She also observed, "I think that the *message* is the medium, not that the medium is the message. Any message that you have, if you communicate [it], that's art."

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