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Christopher Castellani*

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Yoko Ono

WITH LAILA PEDRO

Over the course of a prolific and inventive career, Yoko Ono has continually challenged the meaning, structure, and limits of art. Since the 1950s, she has been a pioneer of avant-garde and experimental culture, with a multimedia practice that encompasses music, performance, instructions, writing, and film. By turns playful and visceral, violent and witty, Ono's highly conceptual works are also informed by a profound commitment to peace activism. Following a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (*Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1961 – 1970* (May 17 – September 7, 2015)), Ono's new solo exhibition, *THE RIVERBED*, is now open at Galerie Lelong (through January 29) and Andrea Rosen Gallery (through January 23). Before the openings, Ono spoke with Laila Pedro about the genesis of the exhibition, about healing and mending, and about the powerful ripple effect of small, thoughtful actions.

LAILA PEDRO (RAIL): How did *THE RIVERBED* develop?

YOKO ONO: This particular river is very interesting. All rivers are interesting, but this riverbed is between life and death. There's an Asian story of the river you cross to go to another dimension. And there's a story about somebody carrying something and going through the river, across the river. And of course, you know, you don't carry anything when you are crossing a river. But the person was *thinking* he was carrying something. It's quite conceptual. I wanted to start with a riverbed like that. For *Stone Piece* [2015], there are many stones there. The stones represent something that can help us in our lives. I want you to pick one stone, and there is a meditation rug. So you can sit with the stone and meditate. Give all the anger, the sorrow, the fear—all of those things—to the stone. You can get rid of it that way.

RAIL: So the stone starts to carry the load?

ONO: Yes. Isn't that great?

RAIL: Yes—you can feel all this weight in the stones, beyond their actual mass.

ONO: And we do need something like that. With *Line Piece* [2015], I realized that I wanted to just go to the farthest end of the planet—it extends very far, conceptually. For the audience, the feeling is that I would like to go with you.

RAIL: Did these evolve from other works?

ONO: No, not really. The concept of the riverbed is something that I have used many times, actually. But not in this way.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Matthu Placek.

RAIL: The riverbed is a potent symbol from the natural world. You've often referenced natural elements in your work: flames, the sky, flies. But here the natural images are foregrounded. What is the importance of the river stones? Do they reflect an evolution or a transformation?

ONO: For something to become a stone, there is an incredibly long amount of time and space that goes into it. So, a stone is a very, very powerful being. Much more powerful than we are. And you can say this about the sky or the water, too. We are surrounded by power and wisdom. Without wisdom they could not have become that, you know. It is a very beautiful surrounding that we have. We are very lucky people. And, in that environment, I am trying to get us to be healed.

RAIL: Is that healing connected to *Mend Piece* [1966/2015]?

ONO: *Line Piece* and *Stone Piece* are both very, very new pieces. I've never done that before. But *Mend Piece* I've done a few times. And the reason is because first I started to mend, and I thought about just mending relationships. The imagination stopped there, in a way. But then I realized that actually, in mending a cup, you're mending the planet, mending the universe. It's a great thing. You are *just* mending—but you're mending all those things, as well. And they do get mended. When I first started doing this piece, I think that society was not so incredibly violent. It was very different. And now, there's so much violence and so much destruction. So, we have to mend it.

RAIL: It has a communal element too, right? People work on the broken cups in a collective space, and then actually share coffee in the mended cups. So it's a small action that you're extrapolating into a huge action.

ONO: Exactly. I wrote this thing called *Pebble People*. It tells the story of being near the ocean and putting a pebble in. We throw the pebble, maybe without even thinking about it, and the pebble just falls in. But that—that particular act—changes the whole ocean. Did you notice that? You see, the pebble goes in, like the waves. The waves go, go, go; out, out, out. It doesn't stop.

RAIL: It ripples.

ONO: It ripples, and we create the ripple. You see? And how do we create the ripple? With just a tiny little pebble. And I'm saying we are the pebbles. It's much better that we are pebbles than somebody who's got a big stone trying to change the world. And you shudder—everybody's frightened. But the pebble people, what they're doing is just taking care of their lives in the way that they think it should be done. Just by doing that, the whole world is changing.

Detail: Yoko Ono, *Line Piece* (Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York 2015/2016), 2015. Materials variable. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. © Yoko Ono. Photo: Pierre Le Hors.

RAIL: You spoke about including a meditation rug in this installation. Does the practice of mindfulness influence the creation of your work in a direct way?

ONO: It influences all of us. When you're talking with someone, for example: whether you talk very quickly, thoughtlessly or if, when someone asks you a question, you create a little space, and then you answer. There's a big difference. So, all of us are always creating the world. Sometimes in a bad way, sometimes in a good way. And that's what I'm doing. I'm a pebble person.

RAIL: Many of your pieces take or incorporate the form of instructions. Do you think your instructions are like little pebbles?

ONO: Yes. Yes. [Laughter.] You got it.

RAIL: *Mend Piece* recalls the tradition of *kintsugi*—of mending broken ceramics with gold or precious substances. It's a powerful concept, to take something fractured and make beauty out of it, without hiding the break. Is the fracture or the feeling of that pain something you were thinking of with this piece?

ONO: Well, I'm feeling the mending. And the healing. [Laughter.] And this is so important. And just as we are talking, we are healing something.

RAIL: It feels like we are, doesn't it? I'm also interested in the idea of restraint in your work. I think your works tend to be very precise—

ONO: They're precise, yes.

RAIL: Do you think that having these very precise instructions can be a form of restraint, or constraint?

ONO: No. You see, I was trying to get out of the constraint. And it's not very easy, but I think it started to happen. The first time I thought, "Oh, why don't I make unfinished music?" But it was very painful for me, because I'm just another artist, a musician, who likes to create something in my own way, and if somebody touches it and makes it different, I wouldn't like it. That's sort of like the artist's ego, you know, that we all have—or all had. And I thought, "What am I going to do—am I going to let people touch my art, or my composition? I don't think I like that." But then I realized that if I don't like the feeling, that should be a good thing! [Laughter.] And so, let's go with it.

RAIL: You've not only gone with it, but you've taken it very far—the audience is now, and has been for a long time, a crucial part of your work.

ONO: Yes. It's also to wake them up to their own creativity, because they have to create too. And so I see a lot of togetherness and a lot of creativity opening up now.

RAIL: Speaking of compositions, I feel like some of your most visceral work is sound work, is musical work. How do you think about the experience of sound in a context like this, where it's not the main focus, but still part of the experience?

ONO: I think that there are two very, very important vibrations. One is sound, and one is vision. You can't say which is stronger or which is better—I'm interested in letting both vibrations grow.

RAIL: In this current exhibition, you've made it an important point to work with women.



Installation view: Yoko Ono: *The Riverbed*, Galerie Lelong, New York, Dec. 11, 2015 – Jan. 29, 2016. © Yoko Ono, Galerie Lelong New York.



Yoko Ono, *Mend Piece* (Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York 2015/2016), 1966/2015. Ceramic, glue, tape, scissors, and twine. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. © Yoko Ono. Photo: Pierre Le Hors.

ONO: I'm glad that you point that out, because I'm interested in bringing out all the problems and what we are dealing with. And one of the things I am dealing with still is a get-together of women. It's very difficult, you know. We just like to work with male curators usually, you know. And women can be sort of suspicious of each other. So instead, I said, "Let's do a show with two galleries—very intelligent, very individual—who have to come together." Would they do that? Would it work? It was a very interesting thing that we did. We did it all with just women, and it worked.

RAIL: I'm curious about your relationship with poetry. I often read the instructional works, and the different pieces—*Line Piece*, for example—as poems. Do they feel like poems to you, or do they feel more like immersive experiences?

ONO: I think that poetry is the highest form of art. And anything that you can say in a short line is something that I think is much better than if you have 5,000 pages of something. What are you going to say, you know? I started as a poet, in a way.

RAIL: How so?

ONO: Well, when I was in high school, all I did was just write poems. And when I was really young people would say, "She's always saying things in poetry."

RAIL: You've always been very confident about approaching a whole range of media. I have a hard time thinking of a medium in which you haven't worked.

ONO: I fall in love with mediums.

RAIL: At different points in your life?

ONO: Not different points in my life, but maybe different days of my life.

RAIL: Is there a medium that's particularly drawing you now?

ONO: I still think that music, which is sound, and art, which is vision, are the most important vibrations. I think that these vibrations go all the way to other planets and universes. And, my feeling is that because we, the human race, have been so careless, we've created many violent situations, and we can create a very, very difficult situation for the universe. And so, we have to start to change our minds—and we will. And all the planets will be open to us. ☺