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Yoko Ono Asks Gallery Visitors to Repair the Impossibly Broken

by Allison Meier on December 14, 2015



Yoko Ono, "Mend Piece" at Andrea Rosen Gallery (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Two Chelsea galleries are simultaneously hosting the same audience-activated Yoko Ono pieces, with collaborative mending of shattered ceramic, sketching of an infinite line, and contemplating river rocks. Yoko Ono: The Riverbed opened last Friday at Galerie Lelong and Andrea Rosen Gallery, and until the end of January the spaces will be gradually transformed by visitor actions.

Each work is one of Ono's instruction pieces, an approach she's used since the 1960s, as demonstrated in her recent Museum of Modern Art solo show on her 1960 to 1971 art. In "Stone Piece," a new piece, river rocks are arranged on the gallery floor and you're asked to "choose a stone and hold it until all your anger and sadness have been let go." Some of the smooth rocks have words like "imagine" and "remember" written by Ono on their sides to meditate on while you rest atop a floor cushion. Alongside "Line Piece," another new installation, has a stretch of twine crossing the gallery walls, and low desks with compasses, rulers, and protractors next to large sketchbooks, with the instruction: "Take me to the farthest place in our planet by extending the line."

In smaller rooms of both Galerie Lelong and Andrea Rosen Gallery, Ono's 1966



Yoko Ono, "Line Piece" at Galerie Lelong

"Mend Piece" is restaged with long tables cluttered with broken cups and plates, and scissors, tape, rubber cement, and string all available to attempt to reassemble the fragments into a new whole. "Mend with wisdom mend with love. It will mend the earth at the same time," the wall text states. Curiously, both of these stations are also joined by espresso bars serving coffee in Ono's Illy collaboration cups, where gold lines represent the mended cracks from catastrophic events, from Hiroshima to Guernica. The coffee is intended as encouragement to linger, and to give the space the sense of community, but it also has an odd commercialism contrast to the anti-material works.

On my Saturday visit, people seemed baffled by the river rocks — if I must carry this until my rage has passed, do I take this rock with me for my lifelong companion? — letting them alone in a neat arch at Lelong, or idly stacking them in cairns at Andrea Rosen. Likewise with "Line Piece," some were dutifully extending it through the sketchbook, or onto the wall, while others drew freely on the pages.

"Mend Piece" provoked the most interaction and genuine joy from visitors. The completed projects on the shelves were manic melds of materials, like some nightmarish children's craft room, some delicately suspended with intricate knots, others just garbled together with as much rubber cement as they could hold. Scissors from the table were stuck onto plate pieces, a river rock was confiscated to rebuild a teacup, and even one of the fancy Illy cups was wound with twine into the haphazard repairs. Like much of Ono's most interesting work, what makes "Mend Piece" a recurring success is it takes her minimalist color and materials palette, here with the cascade of white ceramics, and through some simple direction asks the audience to drop pretension in considering larger ideas of life and death, including its edges of suffering. You're warned that handling the sharp ceramic parts is at your own risk, and I did get a tiny cut on my finger, a loss of skin I only noticed after I'd stepped out of the gallery and its fragile world of risk and meditation.