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Remembering Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*

Julia Bryan-Wilson

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1. 'To the Wesleyan People (Who Attended the Meeting)', in *The Stone* (New York: Judson Gallery, 1966), reprinted in Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1970), unpaginated.

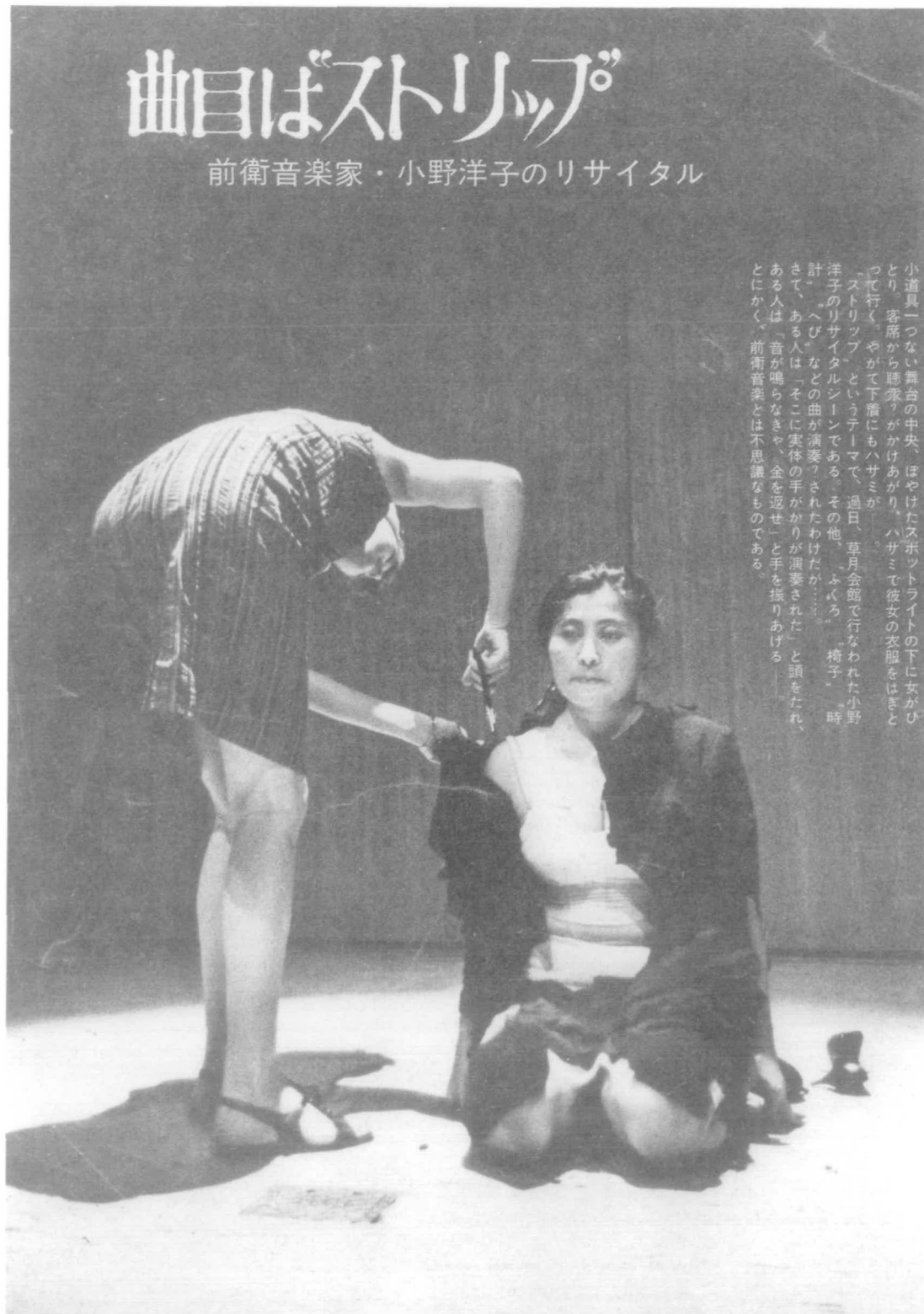
2. Ono herself performed *Cut Piece* four times: in Kyoto, Tokyo, New York, and at the Destruction in Art Symposium in London. While the work was eventually written as a score for others to perform, and many have, I deal here with Ono's own performances, all of which took place in the years 1964–6. Detailing the events in Kyoto is not meant to claim that this first performance is the 'ideal' toward which all other repetitions strive, but to underscore that the work originated in Japan.

The Body Stripped Bare

On 20 July 1964 Yoko Ono first performed *Cut Piece*, a work in which the audience cuts the clothing from her body piece by piece (Fig. 1). As part of an evening of works billed as a 'Contemporary American Avant-Garde Music Concert', Ono shared the stage of Kyoto's Yamaichi Concert Hall with Tony Cox and Al Wonderlick. She called her concerts 'strip-tease shows', saying that this referred to the 'stripping of the mind'.¹ Works performed that night included *Fly Piece*, in which Ono asked the audience to leap from ladders placed on the stage, and *Word of Mouth Piece*, in which Ono whispered a word into the ear of an audience member, who then turned to her neighbour and repeated the word, thus inaugurating a chain of whispers that eventually snaked through the entire concert hall. These Conceptual pieces set the stage for *Cut Piece*, as they demanded a high degree of audience participation and played on viewers' fantasies, interactions, and imaginations. As in every iteration of *Cut Piece*, Ono knelt on a stage and placed a large pair of scissors in front of her.² She asked audience members to come up, one by one, cut off her clothes, and take the scraps with them. After these verbal instructions, she remained silent for the duration of the piece. Her posture, with her legs folded underneath so that her body rested on her shins, replicated the polite Japanese sitting position *seiza*, assumed in formal or respectable environments (Fig. 2). Significant pauses elapsed between each hesitant cut, and the piece ended when the audience stopped cutting—long stretches punctuated by the quiet sounds



Fig 1. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1964, Yamaichi Concert Hall, Kyoto. (Photograph: Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive, New York.)



小道具一つない舞台の中央、ぼやけたスポットライトの下に女がひとり。客席から聴衆がかげあがり、ハサミで彼女の衣服をはぎとつて行く。やがて下着にもハサミが。
「ストリップ」というテーマで、過日、草月会館で行なわれた小野洋子のリサイタルシーンである。その他、「ふばろ」「椅子」「時計」「へび」などの曲が演奏されたわけだが……
さて、ある人は「そこに実体の手がかりが演奏された」と頭をたれ、ある人は「音が鳴らなきや、金を返せ」と手を振りあげる。
とにかく、前衛音楽とは不思議なものである。

Fig. 2. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1964. Sogetsu Art Center, Tokyo. (Photograph: Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive, New York.)

3 Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties. American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (Abrams: New York, 1996), p. 133. Another reading that turns on questions of the gaze and voyeurism is Kathy O'Dell's 'Fluxus Feminas', *TDR: The Drama Review*, no. 47, Spring 1997, pp 43–65.

4. 'Mother Laughed: The Bad Girls' Avant-Garde', in Marcia Tucker (ed.), *Bad Girls* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1994), p. 65.

5. Martha Schwendener, 'Yoko Ono', *Artforum*, January 2001, p. 139.

6. Ono wrote three versions of the score, one of which includes the proviso that 'the performer need not be a woman'. I take this statement to refer to Ono's humanism, not to dismiss the feminist implications of the piece. For a reading that elucidates the history of feminist responses, but feels they have confined the reception of the work, see Kevin Concannon's 'Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*: Critical Receptions', presented at the Third Annual Performance Studies Conference, Georgia Technical University, 1997, <[http // webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Concannon.html](http://webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Concannon.html)>

of scissors slicing through cloth. Ono's own silence was thrown into relief by the anxious titters of audience laughter. As her body was eventually bared, viewers descended the stage steps clutching the remnants of her dress and underclothes.

This essay asserts that *Cut Piece*, seen in dialogue with Ono's other works and situated within the context of the international Fluxus art movement, actively generates feminist political readings. I specify the ways in which *Cut Piece* cites the visual culture of atomic war in order to confront the influence of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on post-war Japanese art. By integrating Ono's art into a broadly understood feminism, one that directs itself toward the circulation of the female body within global politics, this essay considers *Cut Piece*'s uses of a body not only gendered, but formed by nation, race, and history. Art historians have rightly looked at *Cut Piece* as a prototype for feminist performance art. However, this feminism is often of a limited scope, and it turns Ono's piece into a literalisation of 'undressing' as violence to the female body; as Thomas Crow writes, this work 'acutely pinpoints (at the very point when modern feminist activism was emerging) the political question of women's physical vulnerability as mediated by regimes of vision'.³ In this reading, Ono's body represents all female bodies, and she as female art object represents all females as objects. In the catalogue for the exhibition *Bad Girls*, wherein Ono is celebrated as one of the 'foremothers' of bad-girlism, Marcia Tanner lists the 'serious issues' that Ono is confronting in *Cut Piece*: 'voyeurism, sexual aggression, gender subordination, violation of a woman's personal space, violence against women'.⁴ In such instances, Ono's body is taken as a body stripped, scrutinised, and violated by the audience's gaze, and the work is described as 'really quite gruesome—more like a rape than an art performance'.⁵ These statements, 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 a gift, a gesture of reparation, or a ritual of remembrance.

For *Cut Piece* does not simply accuse the audience for taking up the scissors, and it does not unmask the audience as merely sadistic. Indeed, the viewer's participation is vital to the piece's reciprocal ballet. By accentuating the violence of the situation, these readings elide the more complex dynamic of simultaneous destruction and memorialisation. Although such readings have been productive for feminist understandings of Ono and her early work, they do not elucidate *Cut Piece*'s uncomfortable intersection between sex, nationality, and physicality.⁶ Rather than tidily offering the body up to be assigned a single meaning, *Cut Piece* stages its unease with the interaction between the performing body and the interpreting audience. The nudity in *Cut Piece* is not so much the index of its maker's status as a woman as it is the vehicle for the work's key metaphor. Nudity, with its implications of vulnerability and danger, was deployed by Ono in its relation to wartime afterimages. By using strategies of commemoration and the souvenir, Ono's art worked to counteract atomic amnesia. In *Cut Piece*, the body announces itself not only as a recipient of risks and threats, but also as a source of gifts. This dualism of aggression and generosity has complex implications for the audiences of this work, whether these audiences are viewers with scissors in hand or art historians some forty years later.

How can we rethink *Cut Piece* in a way that does not circle back to the scandal of exposed female flesh, with the stripped female body reading only as a 'universal' signifier of female victimisation? Looking at Ono's art within a national context does not mean reducing art-historical interpretation to issues of identity. Never transparently 'Eastern' or 'Western', Ono's own shifting notions of identification complicate the reception of *Cut Piece* by forging a space where race cannot be understood nakedly, but rather as a dialogic production of performance and reception. The piece's stripping does not disclose a stable body under these costumes, but instead refuses stability in its restless repetitions and its mutable reliance on the viewer.

Threats and Gifts

Ono has embedded her work in her own personal history, writing that its origins 'go back to the time of the Second World War when we had no food to eat, and my brother and I exchanged menus in the air'.⁷ To situate her work in this devastating moment requires a brief biography. Ono was born in 1933 to a wealthy banking family in Tokyo, and spent many of her earliest years travelling back and forth between Japan and New York or San Francisco. Her family was economically ruined at the beginning of the war. Ono lived in Japan throughout World War Two, escaping with her family to the countryside after the incendiary bombings of Tokyo. She was twelve years old when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At this time, because they could not afford to eat, she and her brother would order food from an imaginary future to sustain them.

Though Ono's 'intentions' cannot be circumscribed to one single moment or experience, I invoke her memory of wartime hunger in order to put Ono's performances into a feminist context that concerns itself not only with ocular terror, but with the widely experienced deprivations and atrocities of war. Understanding the war's impact on Ono's own body helps resituate her art within a more international feminism, as it circulates the female body emphatically within the body politic. Concentrating only on the audience's sadism shifts this piece into the terrain of personal bodily injury and away from the rubric of historical violence. But Ono's work of the 1960s is framed by World War Two on one side and Vietnam on the other; the war of the past and the war of the present combined to create an intense anxiety about the status of the future, one that she worked through obsessively in her art. Her anxieties manifest themselves in material traces and mementoes.

Many of Ono's works are concerned with the disruption of memory and the obsolescence of history. In 1962 she made the instruction painting *Conversation Piece*: 'Bandage any part of your body. If people ask about it, make a story and tell. If people do not ask about it, draw their attention to it and tell. If people forget about it, remind them of it and keep telling. Do not talk about anything else.'⁸ These instructions were actively embodied in *Fog Piece*, as the audience, in an inversion of the disrobing of *Cut Piece*, wrapped Ono in white bandages while a fog machine belled out smoke to obscure her further. And in *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ* (Fig. 3) from 1965, Ono wrapped the entire Fluxorchestra in gauze. The players were ultimately so bound together that they had to cease playing, and silence descended over the concert hall as the orchestra sat wrapped up as if in a twisted hospital ward. Bandages and gauze became vehicles for her insistent retellings of some unnamed injury. Thus Ono's art of the 1960s can be seen as an attempt to 'not talk about anything else', to keep reminding, to keep from forgetting.

7 'To the Wesleyan People', in *Grapefruit*, unpaginated. For a comprehensive biography of Ono, see Douglas Kirk, 'In Tokyo', in Jonathon Cott and Christine Doudna (eds), *The Ballad of John and Yoko* (Rolling Stone Press: New York, 1982), pp. 14–29. Her biography has also been summarised in recent works such as Alexandra Munroe's overview essay in *Yes Yoko Ono* (Japan Society: New York, 2000), pp. 10–37.

8. Ono, *Grapefruit*, unpaginated

9. Gino DiMaggio, 'Fluxus as a Private Form of Subversion', in *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus* (Mazzotta: Milan, 1990), p. 41. Alexandra Munroe echoes this in her essay on Tokyo Fluxus, stating that their existential jokes took place 'in the shadow of Auschwitz and Hiroshima'. In 'A Box of Smile', in Munroe (ed.), *Scream Against the Sky: Japanese Art After 1945* (Harry N. Abrams: New York, 1994), p. 215.

10. Kristine Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions' in Paul Schimmel (ed.), *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979* (Thames and Hudson: Los Angeles, 1998), p. 228.

Fluxus events and Body art are often understood through the discourse of catastrophe, specifically as a response to the possibility of global annihilation and the invention of mechanised death machines. For some, Fluxus employs the absurd to escape from the numbing truths of war; as one Italian critic writes, 'Fluxus arises as the rejection of a reality that has left behind it the systemic carnage of Auschwitz and Hiroshima to look at the even more sophisticated carnage of Vietnam'.⁹ For others, the use of the individual body with its expressive or emotive gestures in art is viewed as a redemptive return to subjectivity. Kristine Stiles, an art historian who has written on trauma and performance art, states that 'the body as material in art after 1950 was deeply tied to the need to assert the primacy of human subjects over inanimate objects, and was a response to the threatened ontological condition of life itself in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the advent of the atomic age'.¹⁰

As Andreas Huyssen writes, 'the ultimate Fluxus event of the 50s, one performed millions of times over, but never by a Fluxus artist, was of schoolchildren lined up, arms covering their heads, in nuclear war drills'.¹¹ For Huyssen, Fluxus embodies an aesthetic of apocalypse, yet Fluxus art pales beside the random surreality of governmental daily drills. Chance and happenstance—the hallmarks of Fluxus manifestos—lead not to liberation from reality but to an inevitable, uncontrollable, nuclear explosion. Huyssen views the actual tenuousness of the nuclear age as upstaging any prank Fluxus artists might pull. He does not attempt to trace the ways in which individual



Fig. 3. Yoko Ono, *Sky Piece for Jesus Christ*, first performed with the Fluxorchestra, 1965, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York; this version performed in Brooklyn, New York, 1991. (Photograph: Karla Merrifield/Yoko Ono. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive.)

artists or artworks might subtly negotiate the repeated threat that these nuclear war drills stage. Ono and her Fluxus art practice can be more pointedly read as a response to the threat of atomic annihilation if *Cut Piece* and the body stripped bare are returned to post-war Japan.

Cut Piece involves three interlinking gestures: the invitation, the sacrifice, and the souvenir. These are my terms: others write about Ono's passivity, the brutality of the slicing, and the shock of her body in its nakedness. Other characterisations of the work overlook the productive components of this piece—namely, that Ono requests the cutting and that the audience takes away something with them. They also elide the pregnant moments that occur around the cutting which were captured by the photographers and filmmakers who documented the piece.¹² Taking the stage along with Ono, these cameramen—the piece was visually recorded in each of its instances—circled around Ono and introduced a third term to the traditional viewer/object dyad. The eye of the camera, with its reassuring presence, not only acted as an extra witness to the audience participation, but also authorised the actions on stage. With the piece captured on film, Ono ensured that the live event could be strung together later in a series of shots or watched in its entirety, thus replayed again and again. The compulsive rehearsing gives the work a ritualistic flavour, as if the scene itself demanded incessant reworking. And Ono not only repeated this performance herself several times, but facilitated endless recurrences by writing it as an open score.¹³

To start: the fully dressed body is seen on the stage with the scissors; occasionally, remnants from previous performances still litter the ground. This brief moment precedes the invitation, where verbal instructions are issued that the audience should come up to cut the clothes. The solicitation is dual, for it offers not only the opportunity to cut but also the ownership of what one removes. From that invitation follows the sacrifice. While some critics understand the audience's cutting as enacting the violence of the gaze, the vocabulary of the sacrifice proposes that this cutting is not wholly a violation. Ono says she always wore her best outfit to perform *Cut Piece* so that it would really be an offering.¹⁴ In this offering, Ono submitted to the piece, but always retained the ability to stand up and stop the slicing; the score states that the piece ends 'at the performer's option'. Within the confines of the script, one which requires equal measures of passivity and exhibitionism, Ono also controlled her level of nudity, deciding to display herself selectively. The audience's willingness to denude Ono varied: sometimes the cutting would stop with her clothes hanging like rags. At the 1966 London performance, she was left totally naked, but hugged her arms to her chest; at the 1965 Carnegie Hall performance, Ono also shielded her breasts at the moment they were being uncovered (Figs. 4 and 5).

The moment an audience member ascends the stage, the piece activates a set of interactions in which vision bleeds into physical movement. In this circuit of visibility and action, looking is transformed into doing, and who exactly is looking at whom becomes unsettled as the 'viewers' in the audience abjure their spectatorial remove. Her metaphoric giving does not dismiss the function of threat in *Cut Piece*, but stresses its dis-equivalence with actual violence. For the violence inherent in the situation is latent—a concealed threat only rarely made visible. On at least one occasion, this threat erupted suddenly out of the piece's sombre theatre. Ono relates that in the first performance of *Cut Piece*, a man 'came on the stage. . . . He took the pair of scissors and made a motion to stab me. He raised his hand, with the scissors in

11. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (Routledge: New York, 1995), p. 205.

12. The voluminous documentation of *Cut Piece* includes photos by Minoru Niizuma and John Prosser as well as a 16mm film by Albert and David Maysles, 1965, shown in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 1998; *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999; and *Yes Yoko Ono*, Japan Society, New York, 2000. The film's audio element is perhaps its most interesting aspect, for in it one can hear quite clearly the nervous, ambient noises of the audience as they murmur, shift, and clamber to the stage.

13. Ono's written scores were never meant to function as definitive; as mentioned earlier, there are three different scores for *Cut Piece*, including a version in which the audience cuts each other's clothes off (never, to my knowledge, performed). Ono follows John Cage's lead, as Luz Kotz points out, by using the text as both writing and performance to be endlessly reiterated: Kotz, 'Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the "Event" Score', *October* 95, Winter 2001, pp. 55–89.

14. Ono has stated that *Cut Piece* was inspired by a Buddhist allegory: 'according to legend, Buddha renounced his privileged position to go out into the world and to give whatever was requested of him . . . The relationship between the Buddha's giving and the artist's giving intrigued Ono' Barbara Haskell and John G. Hanhardt, *Yoko Ono: Objects and Arias* (Whitney Museum of American Art: New York, 1991), p. 91.

15. Haskell, *Yoko Ono*, p. 91.

16. Quoted in Kristine Stiles, 'The Destruction in Art Symposium: The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Live Art' (Doctoral Dissertation: University of California-Berkeley, 1987), p. 610.

17. KRAB audio archive, Sonarchy website, <<http://www.sonarchy.org/archives/ono.html>>

18. Ono has said in multiple interviews that her concerts in Japan were poorly received and called derivative; this is borne out by multiple reviews written in the early 1960s. Quotes of Japanese reviews are published in *Yoko Ono: Fumie*, curated by Reiko Watanabe (Sogetsu Art Museum: Tokyo, 1990).

19. Japanese comments on unidentified Tokyo review of Ono's Sogetsu Art Center performance, 1964.

20. Haskell, *Yoko Ono*, p. 91.

21. A US-imposed press code forbade mention of the atomic blasts during the occupation period (1945–1952). See Monica Braw, *The Atomic Bomb Suppressed: American Censorship in Occupied Japan* (M. E. Sharpe: London, 1991).

it, and I thought he was going to stab me. But the hand was just raised there and was totally still. He was standing still . . . with the scissors . . . threatening me.'¹⁵

The stillness that Ono recounts has a specific tenor—one of a prolonged, taut menace, a moment arrested in time. Perhaps this man does not misread the menace of *Cut Piece*, but fully occupies it by directly altering its tools—from tailor's shears to potential knife. What kind of tense pantomime is this? At a later performance of *Cut Piece*, one of Ono's friends feared that 'some psychopath might take the scissors and cut her throat or her skin' and stationed himself near the stage so he could jump up if anything happened.¹⁶ However, my rewriting of *Cut Piece* in terms of the invitation and souvenir illustrates that actual physical cutting is not its goal, only its subtext. This distances the work from its popular twinning with Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974), a comparison that misplaces both the stakes of Ono's body as a manipulable object as well as the audience who does her bidding. The terms Ono offered were limited in a way that Abramovic's unscripted action was not, as they were confined by a specified, performer-driven invitation and involved only a single tool, as opposed to the extreme improvisation suggested by the seventy-two objects available to the audience of *Rhythm 0*. Ono's passivity, while real, is undercut by moments of self-assertion such as her shielding her breasts, and hence differs significantly from Abramovic's complete surrender—which led, after six hours of viewer-inflicted actions, to bloodshed.

An emphasis on Ono's personal, semi-masochistic risk, or on the scraping away of clothes to get at the core of female nudity, dominated critical responses to *Cut Piece* in London and New York (summed up by the comments of one unnamed man from a 1966 London audience who thought the cutting helped the viewer 'to destroy and create at once, to see inside, to uncover, to remove, to open the car hood to see the engine'¹⁷). While many critical responses to *Cut Piece* dwell on the exhibitionistic aspect of the work, in Japan this was not the primary focus. Responses in Kyoto and Tokyo leaned towards the confused or the indignant.¹⁸ To quote one audience member from the Tokyo show, which was billed as a music concert: 'Since there wasn't any music, I want my money back'. However, another spectator reported that it was a metaphysical experience of great substance.¹⁹ Ono recounts that a mood of reverence prevailed at the first performance, as the audience very slowly cut her clothes 'with quiet and beautiful movements'.²⁰ These responses are notable not only for what they do convey—frustration or satisfaction—but also for what they do not, as none of them locate the work primarily within the gendered realm of bodily harm.

In 1964, nudity in Kyoto had other implications besides its appeal to the male gaze or its performance of female self-abnegation. There was another, historically specific register of meaning for the naked body, for the ragged outfit, and for the stripping. Figures 6 and 7 are photos taken after the blast in Hiroshima. Pictures such as these, of ruined, ripped remains of clothes, from army and news photos taken by American inspection teams designated to record and report the extent of the atomic damage, were prohibited from being circulated in occupied Japan immediately after the blasts.²¹ It was nearly a decade later when photos by the US Army as well as by Japanese witnesses were published and the destroyed clothes themselves were displayed in peace museums. After the ban was lifted, an outpouring of artistic testimony, including first-person narratives, drawings, and paintings, rushed to fill the hole in the historic record left by censorship. Many of the *hibakusha* (atomic survivors) made drawings decades later, seeking to represent and give form to

an event that had been suppressed. (This mass unleashing of visual evidence after the fact—and Ono's own performance some twenty years later—echoes the psychic construction of *Nachträglichkeit*, the deferral of response to trauma, the trace of which is later energised into active awareness.)

Like the army photos, drawings by some of the *hibakusha* also depict shredded clothing, as in Sadako Kimura's drawing, which shows a small girl with her hair blown up by the fierce atomic breeze (Fig. 8). The clothing destroyed by the atom bomb and the repeated accounts of children wandering the streets with school uniforms hanging off them, burned and torn, submit themselves as visual precedents for the tatters of *Cut Piece*. An account by a twelve-year-old child living in Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, describes the moments after the blast: 'It wasn't until I ran into a cart leading to the Mitaki River that I regained my sense. This was the first time I noticed how I looked. I was bare from the waist up and all that was left of the trousers I had been wearing were the elastic bands around my waist and ankles. I was stripped to my underpants by the bomb.'²² Those too close to the blast died, but those who were near had their clothes ripped off. These images inflect *Cut Piece* with

22. Arata Osada (ed.), *Children of Hiroshima* (Publishing Committee for the Children of Hiroshima: London, n.d.), p. 204.



Fig. 4. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1965, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York. (Photograph: Minoru Niizuma. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive, New York.)

23. See, especially, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage: New York, 1979).

the conceit of the performing body as witness, silently but soberly giving testimony. As in Japan, such photos were largely withheld from United States audiences in the years directly after the bombing, but were later released en masse. Most photos for the US audience in the decades following Hiroshima/Nagasaki were evacuated of human suffering, featuring instead bird's-eye views and mushroom clouds taken from great distances. Later, the *hibakusha* were studied by the US Army and extensively photographed. The pictures were necessary to illustrate the suffering of the enemy, to document and scientifically measure the bomb's consequences. As these images show, clothes were often photographed removed from bodies, hanging empty as they are shorn of their wearers. The people depicted are fragmented, have their backs turned, or are shown in disfiguring close-up. In contrast, Kimura's drawing features a full figure with a strange, small smile on her face as her ragged white dress flutters around her.

By troping the body of the victim, but rendering it whole, breathing, and facing her audience, Ono makes legible what Michel Foucault has termed the 'effects of truth' of the mutilated body.²³ Photographic evidence



Fig. 5. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1966, Africa Center, London. (Photograph: John Prosser. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive, New York.)

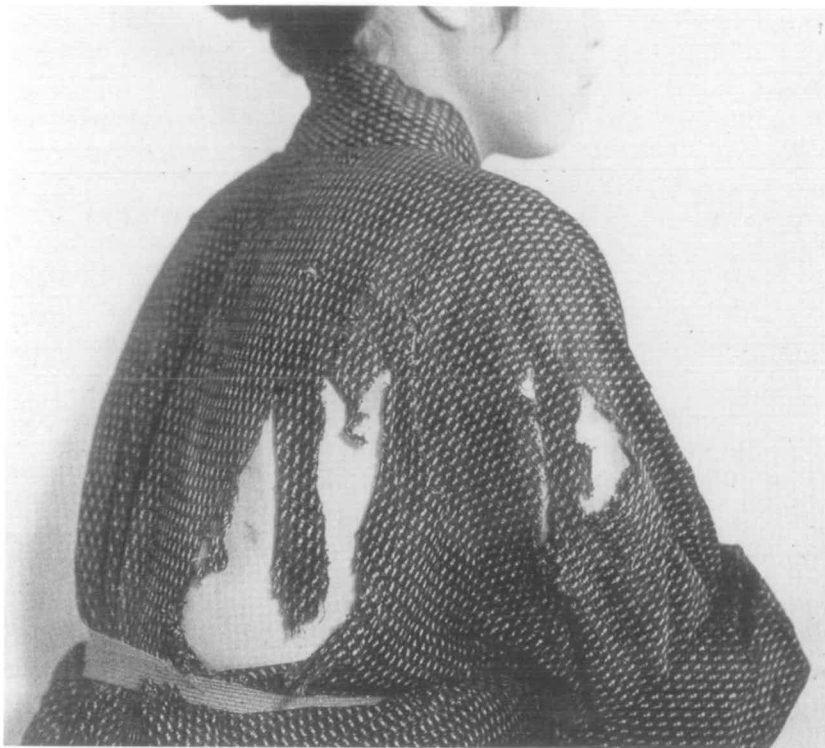


Fig. 6. Survivor of Hiroshima bombing, 1945. (Photograph: US Army, National Archives, Washington, DC.)



Fig. 7. Tattered clothing recovered from bomb victims after the Hiroshima explosion, 1945. (Photograph: US Army, National Archives, Washington, DC.)

24. 'To the Wesleyan People', in *Grapefruit*, unpaginated.

25. Ono enacted a similar piece, *Mend Piece for the World*, on 30 October 2001 at New York's Judson Memorial Church in the aftermath of the 11 September attack. She briefly invoked World War Two and then asked the small audience to assist her in piecing together a large table of shattered pottery, saying, 'Keep wishing as you mend'

26. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (The Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore and London, 1984), p. 135.

27. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 138.

28. Kyo Maclear discusses the importance of photographic witnessing in *Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness* (State University of New York Press Albany, 1999)

29. Haskell, *Yoko Ono*, p. 91.



Fig. 8. Sadako Kimura, *A Girl*, coloured pencil on paper, 1977. (From *Unforgettable Fire: Pictures by Atomic Bomb Survivors*, ed. The Japan Broadcasting Association. © 1977 NHK. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.)

consolidated American regimes of power over the naked 'truth' of Japanese flesh in pain. In *Cut Piece*, Ono offers her body in dialogue with these photos, which were deployed as visible proof of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In these stilled photos, history becomes an unrepeatable instance that is documented and frozen in time. *Cut Piece's* multiple performances give us repetition and change, hence vivifying those images. The scrap of dress is thus a living reminder, a souvenir of the lasting, lingering radioactive effects.

For there is, crucially, the remainder of the dress still in the viewer's hand. How do these scraps of dress, these little mementoes, function? What kind of souvenir is the audience taking? In a lecture given in 1966, Ono said that her events 'are an extrication from the various sensory perceptions . . . the closest word for it may be a wish or hope'.²⁴ Hence her work is also full of a kind of metaphysical optimism—a prayer for the future. Ono enacts memorialisations in other pieces by offering to the audience a series of fragments, residues, and remainders. In *Promise Piece*, first performed in 1966, she smashed a vase, handed out its fragments to the audience and promised to meet back in ten years to reassemble it (Fig. 9).²⁵ And in *Morning Piece* (1964), she sold little, smooth shards of bottle glass with dates attached to them, some from the past and some from the future. Here are past mornings and future mornings to press into the viewer's hand and send off.

These nervous amulets, with their invocations of future memories, are meant to act as commemorative objects. They are mementoes of a performance to be taken home, tactile scraps that incorporate the viewer within the history of the event. As Susan Stewart writes in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 'the souvenir is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia. The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only "behind", spiralling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future'.²⁶ While most souvenirs are aids in nostalgia, helping one to look backward, Ono turns dates from the future into souvenirs from the past: that is, she sends souvenirs into the future as a ritual to make tomorrow happen. Although the tendency of the souvenir is to 'move history into private time',²⁷ displacing attention into the past, *Cut Piece* and *Promise Piece* use the souvenir to force the audience to take history home for the future. The vase is broken in order to be disseminated so that its shards can inhabit someone's life as a tangible memory. After ten years of remembering the vase as whole, it will be lovingly set right and glued back together. As Ono performs, she gives out material guarantees in order to secure the future. But this optimism is undercut with violence, for the past informs the always provisional future. And even when the scraps have all been cut away and the shards of pottery lost in pockets and desk drawers, we still have the photos as another type of reminder. It is within this agitated relationship to evidence that the abundance of pictures of *Cut Piece* takes on new meaning. The photos form another kind of record stemming from an urgent need to preserve an ephemeral event.²⁸ With its almost excessive documentation, which is by necessity a fragmented and incomplete archive of the live event, *Cut Piece* bespeaks a deep worry about preservation and the eventual degradation of memory.

Since Ono's art is as propelled toward the future as much as it is influenced by the past, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to these residues as particular kinds of gifts rather than as souvenirs. Ono herself has pointed to the gift of *Cut Piece* in a brief, evocative allegory of Buddha's offering.²⁹ Jacques Derrida, picking up on Marcel Mauss and his theories of the gift, writes of the gift's



Fig. 9. Yoko Ono, *Promise Piece*, 1966, re-enacted by Ono at Everson Museum, 1971. (Photograph: Taka Iimura. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive, New York.)

temporal nature: 'the gift only gives to the extent that it gives time. The difference between a gift and every other operation of exchange is that the gift gives time . . . the thing must not be restituted immediately and right away, there must be time in between, it must last—there must be waiting, without forgetting.'³⁰ All of these fragments—the broken vase, the engraved glass, and the scrap of clothing, the photo—function both as gifts that necessitate future time, and as souvenirs, as tokens of remembrance.

Cut Piece, *Promise Piece*, and *Morning Piece* present themselves as 'gifts' to us, and in exchange, we give back the promise to wait and to remember. This vital emphasis on memory and the gift enables the audience's participation to be a gesture of reparation, in which the viewer plays a critical role in forging memory. Derrida's notion of the gift, with its pressure on memory, obligation, and mutual exchange, gives us a new lens to see how Ono's *Cut Piece* is an active aid in historical understanding. In this, the work not only situates itself as a trace or image-memory of bombed bodies, but also asks the viewer to assist in the work of remembering.

Several other works by Ono nominate themselves as afterimages of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; for example, *Shadow Piece*, which was performed along with *Cut Piece* at the Destruction in Art Symposium in 1966. In *Shadow Piece* (Fig. 10), Ono began to collect shadows of people by tracing them on to long pieces of cloth. Like naked bodies and shreds of clothing, the shadow is another key motif in post-bomb photographs, as the brightness and intensity of the impact left imprints of victims' shadows like blackened smudges on stone paths and streets (Fig. 11).³¹ The flash of light of the detonation etched shadows into 'walls, steps, buildings, and even stands of bamboo in Hiroshima and Nagasaki'.³² Shadows, like the one burned on the fortress wall, became emblematic of the physical traces left by the bomb's destruction. Ono's desire to store them up or hoard them in one place reflects the fear of forgetting, as even 'the dark silhouette ingrained on the steps of the Osaka bank are gradually disappearing and, as time passes, memories of that tragic time will gradually be forgotten'.³³ By re-creating remainders such as shadows and

30. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1992), p. 41. I use the word 'gift' with an acknowledgement that it is a contested term. Starting with Marcel Mauss, who theorised it within commodity exchange, the gift has been much debated in recent criticism; Derrida's re-reading of Mauss is significantly influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, who claims that it is the temporal nature of the gift that removes it from commodity exchange.

31. This connection is also stated in Kristine Stiles' essay in Munroe and Hendricks (eds), *Yes Yoko Ono*, pp. 168–70.

32. 'The Crossroads: The End of World War II, The Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War', in Philip Nobile (ed.), *Judgement at the Smithsonian* (Marlowe & Co.: New York, 1995), p. 101.

33. Osada, in his preface to *Children of Hiroshima*, unpaginated.

34. Quoted in Munroe, *Scream Against the Sky*, p. 189. In recent years, Ono has more explicitly stated the ongoing psychic impact of the atomic bombs; see the liner notes for her 1995 album *Rising* (Capitol Records), and the songs she composed for Ron Destro's 1994 off-Broadway play *Hiroshima*.



Fig. 10. Yoko Ono, *Shadow Piece*, 1966, performed at the Destruction in Art Symposium, London. (Photograph: Tom Picton. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive, New York.)

ripped dresses, and then repeating them under the watchful eye of the camera, Ono wants to ensure that they will not vanish forever.

The visual parallel between the images of tattered clothing and *Cut Piece* feeds a necessary understanding of this art as having an historical awareness of itself as explicitly post-war. The term 'post-war', often used in the West as a convenient marker to designate, in shorthand, the later twentieth century, is much more strongly understood in Japan as signifying a time period completely dominated by the aftermath of the Second World War. Post-war art, then, like *Cut Piece*, is weighted with a national, historical specificity. Having grown up during World War Two, those of Ono's generation are known in Japan as 'MacArthur's children', after General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of the US occupation of Japan immediately following the atomic bombings. Critic Tono Yoskiake describes them as the post-Hiroshima generation, in which 'the rubble, the smell of death and the social confusion of the postwar era had constituted their everyday environment. The ruins were their playground and this state of absolute void became necessarily the foundation for their art.'³⁴ This is not to claim that all art from post-war Japan is somehow a reworking, or repression, of the atomic era, but to account for the gravity of the war's enormous visual impact on a generation.

Futures

In 1964, the same year as the Kyoto performance of *Cut Piece*, Hi Red Center, a collaboration among Genpei Akasegawa, Natsuyuki Nakanishi, and Jiro Takamatsu (other 'MacArthur's children' who were informally associated with Fluxus) performed *Shelter Plan* in Japan (Fig. 12). For this piece, they invited various artists, including Yoko Ono, up to a room in the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo where they conducted a strip search, took down exacting individual measurements of weight and height, collected urine and spit samples, and executed other tests in order to build personal bomb shelters. They catalogued

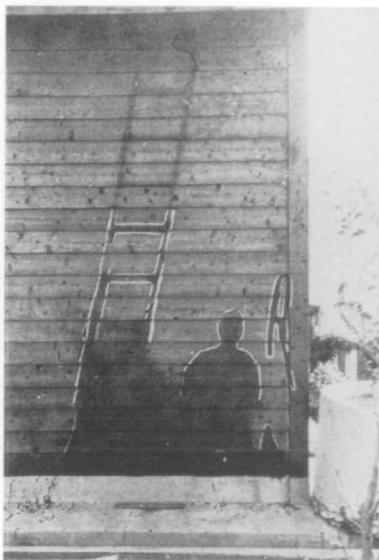


Fig. 11. Nagasaki Fortress Command, 3.5 kilometers from the hypocenter, 1945. (Photograph: Eiichi Matsumoto. Courtesy Eiichi Matsumoto.)

and photographed the examined bodies and drew up blueprints of the personal shelters. Hi Red Center presents the body quantified and regulated, not only in relation to sex, but also by its relation to catastrophe, disaster, and survival, a body so fragile that it needs official protection to proceed into the future. The moment of its unveiling is medical and precise, and the work is charged with the syntax of preparation and immanence. *Shelter Plan*'s staged clinical procedures point out the inadequacy of government-enforced routines that were advertised as protection from atom bombs, like the images of children in nuclear drills holding their hands over their heads to ward off mushroom clouds.

Another example of an artist with an apprehensive relationship to the future is Korean-born Nam June Paik—who was also a participant in Hi Red Center's 1964 *Shelter Plan*. That same year, he wrote a brief autobiography for a Fluxus art book. In it, he simply states:

In 1933 I was one year old.
In 1934 I was two years old.
In 1935 I was three years old.
In 1936 I was four years old.
[. . .]
In 1964 I am thirty-two.
In 1965 I will be 33 if there is no war.
In 1966 I will be 34 if there is no war.
In 1967 I will be 35 if there is no war.
In 1968 I will be 36 if there is no war. . . .³⁵

And so on until the year 2000—Paik spins line after line of this contingent future for himself, distressed and tenuous. His life is recounted as confined to the binary condition of war or no war: 'war' is written as the single event or possibility in his life as he conceives it in 1964. 1964 was the year of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and increasing United States government intervention in Vietnam, and the year that Buddhist monks immolated themselves to protest this intervention. And for Paik and Ono—expatriates dividing their time between Asia, Europe, and the US—in 1964 each year was threatened by war which hung overhead like a knife. In this context, then, the scissors-wielding man at the Kyoto concert reads the performative circumstances of *Cut Piece* correctly, as he transforms the piece into a meditation on threat and destructive potentiality.

The strategy of enacting artistic threat for a socially pointed purpose was widely employed during the late 1960s. One early attempt to perform violence in the realm of the artistic occurred in 1966, when Gustav Metzger organised the Destruction in Art Symposium in London, an art event explicitly aligned with cultural protest and leftist politics. The symposium aimed to explode the categories of fine art and political art; invited artists burned canvases, smashed objects, and instigated other high-profile, provocative acts. On the final evening of this event in 1966, Ono again staged *Cut Piece*. It was widely seen as one of the highlights of the symposium, and an ideal work for inclusion in a context that focused on the dark edge of art. As Metzger commented, 'It was better than I expected. Stronger. And very disturbing.'³⁶

Much of the art featured in the symposium, including *Cut Piece*'s elegant intervention, was seen by critics as a grotesque display of meaningless violence. One *Life* journalist responded to the premise of the Destruction Symposium with dismay: 'I must be missing the message. I know the world is a mess. I know about the Bomb. I know about violence in the streets of New

35. In Hans Becker and Wolf Vostell, *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Realisme: Eine Dokumentation* (Rowohlt: Hamburg, 1965), p. 444. My translation.

36. Quoted in Sules, 'The Destruction in Art Symposium', p. 611.

37. Barry Farrell, 'The Other Culture: An Explorer of the Worldwide Underground of Art Finds, Behind its Orgiastic Happenings and Brutalities, a Wild Utopian Dream', *Life*, 17 February 1967, p. 90.

38. 'DIAS', *Resurgence*, November/December 1966, p. 19.

39. Barbara Tischler, 'Counterculture and Over-the-Counter Culture', in D. Michael Shafer (ed.), *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1990), p. 286.

York. But why does art have to be as bad as life? I just don't see how this kind of thing helps.'³⁷ He turns the art into a dismal replay of daily catastrophe with no redemptive value. Ugliness in art just replicates ugliness in life, forming a closed circuit that has no broader social significance.

However, another account from 1966, by Brenda Jordan for the English *Resurgence*, takes the symposium at its word that it is a response to global battles. She reports that 'the destructive artist who crushes a frog with his boot is relating that action to the absurdity of Vietnam and the injustices of the draft'.³⁸ Hindsight has more forcefully pushed antiwar activism and Ono's work together; for instance, in 1990 Barbara Tischler wrote: 'Yoko Ono's clothing was cut to shreds by audience members, in a symbolic enactment of the violation of an innocent Vietnam.'³⁹ Tischler quickly slides from *Cut Piece* to the violation of an entire country, and what was formerly read as innuendo and avant-garde outrageousness has suddenly become protest art. Ono enacts the 'violation' of Vietnam with her gesture, and the audience is the complicit army. Because of the piece's context within the Destruction in Art Symposium, a critical interpretative framework of protest is created. To Tischler, Ono's body is more than a tool of political resistance: her Japanese



Fig. 12. Ono participating in Hi Red Center's *Shelter Plan*, 1964, Imperial Hotel, Tokyo. (Selected stills by Motoharu Jonouchi, video transferred from 16mm film. Courtesy The Nagoya City Art Museum.)

body actually substitutes for Vietnam in a troubling elision of Asian difference—and never mind that Ono's invitation to cut is hardly 'innocent'. In an atmosphere of articulated art activism, then, *Cut Piece* becomes a pointed, if still enigmatic, wartime intervention. This viewpoint has also been pronounced in a recent history of performance art that states that 'in light of the ongoing Vietnam war, [*Cut Piece*] had a strong political message'.⁴⁰ What this message might be goes unelaborated. These comments point to the ways in which *Cut Piece* has been recontextualised and read not only as an assault on the individual body, but as a potent metaphor for the generalised, submissive, besieged Asian body.

By 1969, the dreaded future had arrived and the previous hope of a future 'if there is no war' disintegrated. Ono, living in the US and married to John Lennon, had stopped performing *Cut Piece*. Instead, she and Lennon started staging media spectacles, including their seven-day peace-protest news conference, *Bed-In*, and their worldwide billboard campaign *War is Over!* (Fig. 13), in which they rented billboards in major cities across the world with a holiday message for peace. Ono wrote of this time, and of the growing critical sense that art was insufficient as a form of protest against Vietnam:

Artists themselves are beginning to lose their confidence. I have wondered myself about this. Why am I still an artist? Why am I not joining the violent revolutionaries? Then I realized that destruction is not my game. I like to fight the establishment by using methods that are so far removed from establishment-type thinking that the establishment doesn't know how to fight back. For instance, they can't stamp out John and Yoko events *Two Virgins*, *Bed Peace*, *Acorn Peace*, *War Is Over*.⁴¹

Ono clearly viewed this work as protest, however unconventional, for it operated on a level so removed from normal discourses of protest that no one could constrain it. She revelled in its distance from recognised strictures of activism; for her, its very creativity gave it subversive power.

Other artists during this time were less sanguine about artistic subversion; they complained that the televised war had grown so overwhelming that it eclipsed all attempts at more ambiguous gestures. The aestheticisation of violence had escalated to such a degree that the desired 'blurring between life and art' seemed to have been accomplished in the service of gross imperialism. The phrase is Allan Kaprow's; in 1969 he wrote: '[S]ophistication of consciousness in the arts today is so great that it is hard not to assert as matters of fact the vapor trails left by rocket tests—motionless, rainbow-colored, sky-filling scribbles—are unequaled by artists exploring gaseous mediums; the Southeast Asian theater of war in Vietnam . . . while indefensible, is better theater than any play'.⁴² The growing anxiety about the inability of art to intervene or even to compete with this 'theater of war' led to the promotion of other types of spectacle such as the *Bed-In* media event. Perhaps paralysed by the incessant flow of distressing televisual images, artists escalated their attempts to circulate in the mainstream spotlight.

Lucy Lippard suggests that 1960s Body art was obliquely concerned with Vietnam, and that some of the more torturous activities of such artists as Vito Acconci and Chris Burden—often seen as solipsistic masochism—also carried a more historical, social meaning, namely an element of guilt about the fact that 'many other young men were putting their bodies on the line in a war'.⁴³ Thus the use of their injured bodies becomes a kind of displaced survivor syndrome. A more compelling argument is articulated by Frazer Ward, who states that the Vietnam context for a work such as Burden's *Shoot* (1971) rests on the audience's 'fascination with violence'.⁴⁴ He contends that Burden set up

40. Robyn Brentano, *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object* (Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art: Cleveland, 1994), pp. 42 and 162.

41. 'What is the Relationship Between the Artist and the World?', written for the Cannes Film Festival, 1971, reprinted in Haskell, *Yoko Ono*, p. 109.

42. 'The Education of the Un-Artist I', in J. Kelley (ed.), *Allan Kaprow Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1993), pp. 97–8.

43. *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* (Whatcom Museum of History and Art: Seattle, 1990), p. 37.

44. Frazer Ward, 'Gray Zone: Watching Shoot', *October* 95, Winter 2001, pp. 115–30.

45. GAAG: *The Guerilla Art Action Group, 1969–1976* (Printed Matter: New York, 1978), unpaginated.

46. In an interview on 19 March 1999, Hendricks said that GAAG's ripping off of clothes was inspired, in part, by accounts of Ono's performance of *Cut Piece* at the Destruction in Art Symposium. GAAG's use of 'rape' as a substitution for the environmental and bodily devastation caused by napalm points to ways in which geopolitical violation is often gendered.



Fig. 13. Yoko Ono and John Lennon, *War is Over!*, 1969, billboard installed in Times Square, New York. (Photograph: Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive, New York.)

a kind of ethical laboratory of public space in which the audience was implicated in the spectacle with their passivity. (*Cut Piece*, by contrast, relied on a renunciation of the spectators' passivity.) As they gained media attention for their assaults on order, Burden and Acconci actually sought to control violence, to manage and engineer aggression toward the male body in order to defuse it. These masculine assertions of danger and survival were a far cry from the peaceful wishes of Ono and Lennon and did not necessarily connote an antiwar politic.

Even more overt in its addressing of the social implications of attacks on the body was the Guerrilla Art Action Group, co-founded by Jean Toche and Jon Hendricks. (Hendricks today acts as Ono's archivist.) In 1969 several members of GAAG tore off each other's clothes while screaming 'Rape!' in the lobby of New York's Museum of Modern Art to protest the art institution's collusion with the military-industrial complex (Figs. 14 and 15). They wore drab, respectable suits into the building and then began to rip each other's outfits in order to mimic the effects of the defoliant napalm. Lying half-nude and dripping with burst packets of blood they had smuggled in under their clothes, the members of GAAG distributed flyers calling for the immediate resignation of the Rockefellers from MoMA's board of trustees because of their capital investments in chemical corporations that manufactured napalm.⁴⁵ Only spectacular, bloody events, GAAG insisted, could visibly impact a culture saturated with images of death. GAAG's stripping of clothes was inspired by *Cut Piece*, but its political undercurrents were turned up to a more audible register.⁴⁶

By 1969 Ono herself was no longer performing the restrained *Cut Piece*, seeking instead to translate her fame into global peace activism. But GAAG's *Blood Bath* was, in a sense, another interpretation of the score of *Cut Piece*, albeit performed under radically different conditions from those of the first performance at the Yamaichi Concert Hall. Of all the readings of *Cut Piece* that have been launched, GAAG's is one of the most compelling, for it allows war and protest to emerge as critical nodes in the work. GAAG's hyperbolic

production of 'normalcy' as it disintegrates into madness transforms the ripping of clothes into an act of resistance.

Present

In recent years *Cut Piece* has become central to Ono's oeuvre. It has been obsessively positioned as the vital heart of her work, which itself belongs to several artistic movements. No longer at risk of slipping into obscurity, as



Fig. 14. Guerrilla Art Action Group, *A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All Rockefeller from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art (Blood Bath)*, 1969. (Photograph: Ka Kwong Hui.)



Fig. 15. Guerrilla Art Action Group, *A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All Rockefeller from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art (Blood Bath)*, 1969. (Photograph: Ka Kwong Hui.)

47. *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party' in Feminist Art History*, The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1996 Here *Cut Piece* is found under the heading 'Violence, Abuse, Autobiography', suggesting that its violence leads only toward, rather than out from, the self. This is a typical reading of the violence of the work, and of many other female performance artists, which insists that their masochism is highly individual, or even personally therapeutic

48. Two examples are Lynn Hershmann, *Cut Piece. A Video Homage to Yoko Ono* (Mia Lar Houlberg in association with Arte ZDF/LA, 1993) and Cecilia Dougherty, *Grapefruit* (Video Data Bank, 1989). In Hershmann's work, three women are cut out of shiny blue prom dresses by an audience of increasingly threatening men. The violence of the audience is made literal as the men wield their scissors in ever more hostile ways. In her queer parody *Grapefruit*, Dougherty renders the Beatles as drag kings, and *Cut Piece* becomes emblematic of Ono's kooky masochism. The instructions for the work are dreamily spoken by a blond woman 'You may come and cut pieces from me', which moves *Cut Piece's* cutting of clothes into an invitation for actual dismemberment

49. Edward Rothstein, 'Dissecting a "Masterpiece" To Find Out How it Ticks', *New York Times*, 30 December 2000, p. B9, 11.

50. Martha Bari comments that 'for Westerners, Ono's kneeling, seated posture on stage gives off complicated sexual signals involving the fantasy of the submissive Japanese Geisha'. 'Yoko Ono's Art: Problems in Research', (Unpublished seminar paper: University of Maryland, 1994), p. 26

51. Haskell, *Yoko Ono*, p. 5.

52. Anthony Cox, 'Yoko Ono and Conceptual Art: Instructive Auto-Destruction', *Art and Artists* 1, August 1966, pp. 16–19.

many of her other works have, it has been circulated with such frequency that it now threatens to become a banally familiar set piece of performance art. Documentation of *Cut Piece* has been widely exhibited in a broad range of contexts: Ono's solo shows, Fluxus group exhibitions, performance art surveys, the 1999 Queens Museum of Art *Global Conceptualism* show, and in an exhibition detailing the importance and influence of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*.⁴⁷ It has been a source of inspiration for women artists: several videos have reconstructed it as a way of acknowledging Ono's legacy.⁴⁸ These diverse retellings have kept it alive and visible, but it increasingly has been made to bear the burden of being Ono's most critically lauded work, the one summoned to rescue her from decades of jokes made at her expense. The full-blown apotheosis (which this essay is certainly implicated in) reached its unfortunate apex in a 30 December 2000 *New York Times* article in which a photo of *Cut Piece* was placed next to *Nude Woman in the Country* by Renoir to illustrate the concept of the 'masterpiece'.⁴⁹ While the juxtaposition means to measure the distance between the works, the pairing also serves to locate the 'masterpiece' directly on to the bared flesh of the female body. Oxford's Museum of Modern Art 1997 exhibition *Have You Seen the Horizon Lately*, curated by Chrissie Iles, and the current retrospective *Yes Yoko Ono*, curated by Alexandra Munroe with Jon Hendricks, doubtless remind scholars of a range of Ono's art besides *Cut Piece*, but it is surely a mark of its productive ambiguity, its almost promiscuous generation of meaning, that *Cut Piece* continues to circulate as the iconic foundation of Ono's work.

Despite the attention it has received, *Cut Piece* has implications for the mutuality of race and gender that have gone under-theorised. What does this suggest about art history and the need for closure, the wish to clean up a body that might speak its own messy and unclear limits? Does *Cut Piece*, with its dual faces of passivity and exhibitionism, exemplify a collective fantasy about the contradictory status of the silent but signifying Japanese female artist?⁵⁰ It is important to keep in mind how Ono's (in)famous body has come to signify 'Japanese female' in very specific and often brutal ways. One must look at Ono's identity as complex and multi-sited within and through notions of 'Japanese-ness'. She herself has both claimed and renounced this identity; consequently, to understand when it is employed and when it is cast away is a significant critical problem. Ono, widely known in Japan as the daughter of a prominent banker, self-consciously embraced a more transnational stance by advertising the 1964 Kyoto concert as an evening of American composers. The poster for the event depicts the other artists in profile, while only the back of Ono's head is shown in a move to dislocate her physiognomically Asian face from the vaunted 'American-ness' of the event (Fig. 16).

In Japan she positioned herself as an expatriate no longer comfortable at home, while in New York she often summoned her Japanese identity. Especially during the beginning years of Fluxus, Ono self-consciously promoted herself as associated with the Japanese avant-garde, writing that her music was 'more a Zen practice or *gyo* than music'.⁵¹ A 1966 article on Yoko Ono, written by her then-husband Tony Cox in *Art and Artists*, spends a full paragraph discussing the Japanese practice of wrapping one's lunch in intricate packaging, implying that Ono's work continued this obscure 'Eastern tradition': 'this approach is referred to as "wabi and sabi" and is considered that no clear translation should be available'.⁵² Cox suggests that Ono is an artist who does not translate clearly, and that the enigmatic aspects of her work should be seen as a delicate part of a foreign culture. Much of Ono's work has inspired Zen-influenced interpretations, ones that she herself has

condoned or produced, and that, furthermore, have inflected readings of *Cut Piece*.⁵³ Ono created a poster to publicise her events at the Destruction in Art Symposium, which listed a series of specifically Buddhist-influenced quotes, including those calling her 'a fey Zen Variant' and 'a new Zen type invention'.⁵⁴

Around the time of *Cut Piece*, Japan served in the US popular press as a source of scandal, and Japanese artists in particular were repeatedly invoked as the vanguard of the 'underground'. From the mid-1950s to the late 1960s, *Life* magazine shot numerous photo-essays on the Gutai Group and other Japanese performance ensembles, reporting in a titillated tone that 'Japanese happeners are known throughout the world Underground for their unblinking attention to pornography. This is true of Japanese living abroad as well as those at home—it is something that stays with them in all climates.'⁵⁵ Maybe this 'unblinking' use of nudity is what led one reporter for the London *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post* to state that 'Miss Ono sat looking inscrutably Japanese (she is actually Japanese) while members of the audience took turns to cut off her clothes with a pair of scissors'.⁵⁶ Ono is Japanese, but 'inscrutably' so, and hence her national identity must be parenthetically authenticated by the London journalist wielding orientalist tropes.

Ono's invocation of her Asian identity as a marker of distinction was always tempered by her desire to be seen as an international artist; wary of being categorised during these years, Ono vacillated between presenting her work as that of an 'American Avant-Garde Composer' and asserting herself as Japanese. Implicit in this bi-national categorisation is an unsettling of the exclusive binaries of Asian and American. She never comfortably claimed to inhabit fully an identity as either 'Eastern' or 'Western', especially after her marriage to Lennon and the racist attacks on her as a Japanese woman. While critics continued to write that her work 'involves an economy of vision which appears specifically Japanese',⁵⁷ she began espousing an eccentric humanist politics in which she exhorted people to disregard markers of race and sex.⁵⁸ Methodologically, taking Ono's biography into account requires theorising an identity that is not singular, or wholly self-determined, but fluid and flexible, particularly pressing upon the mutualities of Japan and America. As Yoshikuni Igarashi states regarding the US and Japan in this period, 'each country defined the other's image in their postwar relations'.⁵⁹ Perhaps the work's collaboration with its viewers insists that the body is not reducible to itself, but is shaped by the condition of its reception; thus *Cut Piece* both disavows and reclaims corporeal identities as it makes evident how these vocabularies are gendered and raced.

Cut Piece centres on the body as a site of memory; it offers to the audience a gift, a means of commemoration. This gift, however, is undercut with uncertainty and ongoing threats, the hovering fear of violence. Unlike Burden's getting shot in the arm, Ono's work metaphorises rather than embodies violence, with only one segment of the tripartite structure involving an actual instance of destruction. In this complex play, the involvement of self and other is not dismantled so much as it is put into balance. The rhetoric of the gift or wish in Ono's work still circulates through *Bed-In* and *War is Over!*: there is an invitation into a bedroom, a hopeful but absurd message that the war is over, if you want it to be.

But these wishes are suddenly broadcast loudly to the world in a way that may sit uncomfortably with art historians so intent upon the personal drama of the individual art work. Indeed, the reception of Yoko Ono uneasily straddles a spectrum of responses, from the current valorisation of *Cut Piece* to the

53. See the paraphrase of Ono's own Buddhist explanation from Haskell, *Yoko Ono*, p. 91.

54. Quotes from the *Herald Tribune* and *Time*, reprinted on a poster for Ono's DIAS events, in Munroe, *Yes Yoko Ono*, p. 169.

55. Farrell, 'The Other Culture: An Explorer of the Worldwide Underground of Art . . .', p. 92.

56. Day-Lewis, 'Music', 29 September 1966, p. 80.

57. Michael Benedikt, 'Yoko Notes', *Art and Artists*, January 1972, pp. 26–30.

58. For example, in the 'Bagism' series, Ono and Lennon gave a press interview together from within a cloth bag because they wanted to be heard as one person rather than seen as of two different races and genders.

59. Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945–1970* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2000), p. 21.



Fig. 16. Yoko Ono, Playbill, 'Contemporary American Avant-Garde Music Concert: Insound and Instructure', with Tony Cox and Al Wonderlick, 1964, Yamaichi Concert Hall, Kyoto. (© 2002 Yoko Ono.)

60. Carlo McCormick, 'Yoko Ono Solo', *Artforum*, February 1989, p. 121.

61. Kristine Stiles' 'Unbosoming Lennon: the Politics of Yoko Ono's Experience', *Art Criticism*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1992, pp. 21–52 comments extensively on the 'thinly disguised specter of Western racism' that formed Ono's 'dragon lady' image. Ono herself discusses this in Melody Sumner, Kathleen Burch, and Michael Sumner (eds), *The Guests Go Into Supper* (Burning Books: Oakland, 1986), p. 177.

62. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (eds), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington Indiana University, 1991).

63. Jennifer Turpin, 'Many Faces Women Confronting War', in Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin (eds), *Women and War Reader* (New York University Press: New York, 1998), p. 4

ongoing dismissal of *Bed-In*, which was mocked in 1969 and is still regarded as a puzzling, if not foolish, attempt to create world peace. A 1998 advertisement for Hilton Hotels featuring *Bed-In* demonstrates how Ono and her later actions have been relegated to the status of cultural kitsch: the full-page spread sets an archival photo of Lennon and Ono performing *Bed-In* alongside recent luminaries such as Larry King and Naomi Campbell, all with the tagline, 'It happens at the Hilton'. This is only one image in a long history of demoting Ono's serious artworks into dated artefacts. Critics continue to stall over the discontinuities in Ono's oeuvre. In order to make sense of these disjunctures, responses, both in Japan and the West, have focused relentlessly on her celebrity, particularly emphasising her marriage to one of the most famous people on the planet. As one writer astutely puts it, 'under critical dissection, the anatomy of her work evaporates. Left empty-handed in its grasp of Ono, her public has compensated by substituting cruder, more manageable representations of her'.⁶⁰ And the cruder representations have, indeed, proliferated. Her 'Japanese-ness', especially, turns against her and becomes an epithet. After her marriage to John Lennon, she became the embodiment of the 'yellow peril' itself, a controlling Asian dragon lady, depicted in the most racist terms imaginable.⁶¹

Against these citations of the damaging insistence on Ono's essential, and limiting, Asian-ness, I want to negotiate the dislocations of Ono's art of in terms of their complex moves through time and space. The work itself engenders complex thoughts about identity and dislocation that weave into notions of the transnational. *Cut Piece* speaks many things, and one of them is an emphasis on the tension between the body and the nation (as in the insistence that Ono 'becomes' the raped country of Vietnam with her actions). *Cut Piece* was repeatedly performed between 1964–6 and then abruptly stopped. Perhaps its quiet ambivalence and its generative room for multiple readings were seen by 1966 as ineffective and weak in the face of more strident political resistance. (Or did Ono stop performing *Cut Piece* soon after her marriage to Lennon because it was too invasive and too intimate for someone thrust into the glaring eye of the media and constantly scrutinised?)

Cut Piece is a pivotal point in Ono's early art, a crucial link between the diminishing visible evidence of the Second World War and the flamboyant interventions during the Vietnam War. The current readings of *Cut Piece* restrict feminism to the resistance of scopical objectification through the assertion of female agency. This constricts the possibilities of artistic feminism concerned with other forms of the oppression of women. The editors of *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* call for a 'politics of location' that accounts for specificity in space and time in order to understand how women are subjected materially across the globe.⁶² Feminism is an especially relevant and productive lens for theorising atomic damage during World War Two, for these bombings 'ended the distinction between combatants and civilians as targets of war. Women and children constituted the vast majority of these civilian casualties.'⁶³ Ono's gender is vital to my arguments for it insists that we acknowledge the impact of war on women. Women were particularly affected by the non-military targeting of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, a distinctive factor of atomic warfare is the high number of female civilian, non-soldier deaths, which leads to an increased 'feminisation' of war.

Ono's art presents not the female survivor as injured, but the survivor as witness—not the body as an authentic source of pain and experience, but as mediated by history and its effects. To theorise and historicise this art requires looking without flinching at years that still bear the shadow imprints of those

who turned to ash in the blast of the bomb. It requires understanding Ono as an artist who saw towns she used to visit reduced to photographs of obliterated scenery. Seeing *Cut Piece* within this shifting national framework allows for a critical understanding of how art and the dislocated body are implicated in the process of memory. Ono offers two kinds of evidence: a tangible scrap of cloth and a photographic reminder of the event. In doing this, she understands that the interaction between the body and the viewer performs the work of commemoration. Today the photographs are all we have to remember this event; and although they are flat relics, they are by no means mute. To conclude, I leave you with these images (Fig. 17), these memories, and say we'll meet back in ten years to discuss them, if there is no war, if there is no war, if there is no war.

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Fig. 17. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1964, Yamaichi Concert Hall, Kyoto. (Photograph: Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive, New York.)