Healed Piece
While you mending the cup,
Think of mending the world.

Kota Okada 2011
Don't talk... Just Kiss

O Yoko

I am here
which practices that blur the boundaries between art and direct action are gaining traction. London-based art, design and architecture collective Assemble’s award of the Turner Prize in 2015 for their community-based work in Liverpool signaled a shift in the parameters of mainstream art to include once marginal practices. Likewise, recent Biennials and taste-making contemporary art festivals like Documenta and Manifesta are full of artists’ collaborations with local communities that address current needs and issues – from creating new public space, to prompting fresh inquiries into criminal treatment of migrants and refugees.

Against this backdrop one would be forgiven for writing off Ono’s symbolic gallery-based acts of participation as mere entertainment or frivolous interaction. To do so, however, risks – as writer Lara Egleston has brought up in debates around Arte Útil - throwing the art baby out with the bathwater. Beyond their relevance as markers in the development of ‘socially engaged art practice,’ Ono’s pieces invite us to (re)consider the critical position that symbolic acts play in transformative aesthetic experience.

In the wake of the explosion of debates around what makes good participatory practice a key element of Bourriaud’s writings on relational practice fell by the wayside. Rather than approaching audience-activated gallery-based installations as ‘microtopias’ or blueprints for socio-political processes, Bourriaud believed the transformative capacity of such works to lie in their potential for subjective rupture. Drawing on Felix Guattari’s concepts of the ‘aesthetic paradigm,’ Bourriaud describes the experience of art, especially that with an unknown outcome and multiple unspecified agents, as capable of ‘unsticking’ the fixed, rigid behaviours and perspectives ingrained by capitalism, opening us up to new possibilities in how we understand and act in the world.1 Philosopers Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou have also written variously on the inherently political dimensions of aesthetic judgment2 and aesthetic experience.3

Viewing Ono’s ‘public participation pieces’ through this lens reframes defiantly impractical acts such as adding to a group of ladders as in Skyladders (1968/2019), or watching a chamber orchestra being wrapped in bandages as they attempt to perform in Sky Piece to Jesus Christ (1965/2019), as brimming with radical potential. They offer experiences that put the everyday into a productive tension with the disruptively strange without clearly defined reason, ends or outcomes. It is within this offer of an open and aesthetically situated form of participation, rather than a purely pragmatic one that mirrors the social directly, that Ono’s work is still dangerously playful.

Andy Abbott is an artist, writer, musician and arts organiser who lives in Bradford.

ENDNOTES:
7. Associazione di Arte Útil: http://www.arte-util.org/about/colophon/

ARI SITE FOR DANGER PLAY”
ESSAY BY ANDY ABBOTT

‘...the artist becomes the creator of a matrix, rather than a completed work: the role of the receiver becomes that of a participant and collaborator. In effect, the receiver does not merely finish a work, but creates it anew with each performance. This is a position of considerable responsibility...’


‘True participation is open and we will never be able to know what we give to the spectator-author.’


We, the audience, are invited to complete the artworks in Yoko Ono’s exhibition at Leeds Arts University. In Add Color Painting (Refugee Boat version) (1966/2019) we are asked to add paint in ‘ultramarine blue, charcoal grey, green, and colors resembling mud (Burnt Umber),’...
and blood (Alizarin Crimson)’ to a boat ‘such as one that refugees have used to cross the water to escape the war.’ For Wish Trees (1996/2019) we can add our wishes written down on tags. Women’s anonymous testimonials are hung on the wall with Ono’s in Arising (2013/2019). In Mend Piece (1966/2019) we can repair cups and saucers whilst thinking about mending the world. To what extent can these poetic invitations to participate be considered radical acts?

Audience-activated, open-ended, instructional works characterised much of the output of the 1960s international Fluxus movement to which Ono was key, especially in its approach to participation and instructional works. Dick Higgins described artwork where the idea or concept behind an action only becomes fully clear once the action has been set in motion or performed, as ‘exemplative work’ or ‘danger music.’ In Fluxus, we can trace the influence of John Cage, his fascination with chance compositions and ‘ready-made sounds’ and, in turn, of Duchamp and the Dadaists.

The Dada movement was a critically playful reaction to the irrationality and horror of the First World War: Fluxus grew from similar conditions decades later. Artist, poet, musician and one-time Leeds Art School tutor Jeff Nutall describes in his 1968 book Bomb Culture how the dropping of the atom bomb in Hiroshima had a profound effect on young people in the 1950s and 60s. It prompted a counter cultural movement that practiced deviant dalliance and radical hedonism.

Fast forward to the present day and we have a new but similar set of conditions for reading, experiencing and appreciating Ono’s audience-activated artworks. In an age of unending austerity and precarious futures, invitations to take part in small-scale, collective poetic actions may still offer a political edge. At the same time, significant shifts in the worlds of art and politics invite a reconsideration of the works on show.

Ono’s artworks are described as ‘public participation pieces,’ a term that in the last couple of decades of discourse in contemporary art has come under a lot of scrutiny. In the 1990s curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s writings on ‘relational aesthetics’ posited that the cutting edge artists of the time had expanded the parameters of their practice to include not just the formal aesthetics of their art but also the social relationships it created. These contentious claims drew a host of criticisms and prompted long-running debates on the history of socially concerned art practice and its methods.

Underpinning these debates have been important questions about not just how people participate, but who participates and why. Critics have argued over whether participatory art practice was the same or different to community art; whether such art should be judged on aesthetic or ethical terms; whether participation in art is analogous to the political project of direct participation; whether it is art’s role to highlight problems or to fix things and plenty more besides.

More recently the conversation about how pragmatic art should be - and the relationship with audiences this proposes - focuses on so-called ‘useful art’ or Arte Útil. The Asociación de Arte Útil, initiated by the artist Tania Bruguera, has proposed a criteria for art that includes that it ‘replace authors with initiators and spectators with users’ and for art to ‘have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users.’ For Arte Útil advocate Stephen Wright this requires retooling our conceptual vocabulary of art towards a new ‘lexicon of usership’ that is proper to practices that apply art as a tool to make positive social change.

Whilst the institutional artworld of 2019 still has a long way to travel before it can claim to be an engine of social justice – it is nevertheless one in
Add Colour Painting (Refugee Boat), an artwork by Yoko Ono that viewers contribute to, is at Blenheim Walk Gallery at Leeds Arts University.

DANNY LAWSON/PA
Yoko Ono exhibition comes to Leeds Arts University

An exhibition by Yoko Ono is the first in a new gallery at Leeds Arts University. But it’s not the only time her work has been seen in the city, writes Chris Bond.

By Chris Bond
Sunday, 17th February 2019, 4:00 pm
Updated Sunday, 17th February 2019, 4:02 pm

Back in 1966, a young experimental artist from Japan performed in Leeds. Many of those in the audience had probably never heard of her before, but by the end of the decade she was one of the most recognisable women on the planet. Her name was Yoko Ono.

Patrick Hughes, a surrealist artist, recalls the performance in the Vernon Street building at Leeds College of Art (now Leeds Arts University). “Yoko Ono visited with her then husband Anthony Cox, and their three-year-old daughter Kyoko. When we came into the lecture theatre, Yoko and Anthony were hidden in a large black bag on the dais and a
New Leeds exhibition showcases the work of Yoko Ono

Back in 1966, a young experimental artist from Japan performed in Leeds.

By The Newsroom
Thursday, 21st February 2019, 12:23 pm
Updated: Thursday, 21st February 2019, 12:27 pm

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