

#### **JPRI Occasional Paper No. 18 (November 2000)**

#### **The Importance of Yoko Ono**

by Murray Sayle

Originality, it is said, usually means coming from somewhere else. “Somewhere else” can be many places: another time, another culture, the other gender, despair, madness-- anywhere, except familiar here and everyday now. John Lennon has told of his first magical meeting with Yoko Ono, when he wandered into her one-woman show at the Indica Gallery in London on November 9, 1966, a pivotal date in the ferment remembered as the Nineteen Sixties, and was intrigued, as well as mystified, by what he saw. Invited by Ono to pay five shillings to hammer a nail into a piece of plain wood shown as artwork, Lennon made a counter-offer: “Well, I’ll give you an imaginary five shillings and hammer an imaginary nail in.” “That’s when we really met,” Lennon later recalled. “That’s when we locked eyes and she got it and I got it, and, as they say in all the interviews we do, the rest is history.”

All lovers know the moment when complicity leaps like an electric spark, but in their case, founded on what? Outwardly, the two had nothing in common. Lennon had come from the “genteel poverty” of a dysfunctional working-class family, via art school and sweaty teenage dance hangouts in Liverpool, England, and Hamburg, Germany, to world fame and an honorable fortune as a rock-and-roll musician, composer, and role model for the first generation of Western youth to remember nothing of World War Two. Ono, seven years his senior, remembered all too well the apocalyptic end of Japan’s Pacific War, the hunger and despair that had followed the defeat and enemy occupation which she had seen at first hand. But her own roots were in wealth and privilege: her mother Isoko came from the Yasuda banking family, and her father, Eisuke Ono, himself a banker by profession, descended from a long line of samurai warrior-scholars. Yoko had known little personal experience of deprivation, and had been educated among Japan’s business and intellectual elite. Just the same, like had recognized like, at that mythic London meeting.

Why? The explanation lies half-buried under the decades of Japan’s new prosperity. By 1966 Lennon, was emerging as one of the gurus of the disillusioned, questing mood called “The Sixties” in the West. Yoko Ono had been there, spiritually, long before. Something very like the mood of the Sixties first took shape in Tokyo in the late 1940’s; Japan’s confused, hungry years were the “somewhere else” Yoko Ono came from. Even then, and there, it was the amalgam, rather than any of its elements, that was really new. Radical pacifism and politicized feminism had both erupted in spiritually defeated Europe after the First World War, where they had found artistic voices in the instant arts of gesture and

performance, made somewhat more durable by photographs, and in the perversely intellectual anti-intellectualism of Dada.

Bereft of social and political protest, however, Dada became just another style, and it was as an avant-garde style that Dada in the 1920's reached Japan, which had suffered next to nothing, and gained much, by the First World War. By the late 1940's, however, after the Second World War, Japan was in a state of despair even deeper and longer-lasting than Europe had known after the first war and by the mid-fifties Japanese art had found a similar expression, this time not as an imported style but with its own emotional authenticity. Japanese ingredients, notably the cerebral anti-intellectualism of Zen Buddhism, flavored a mixture which was original, distinctive, and more than the sum of its parts. Yoko Ono was the prophetess who, with the help of John Lennon, brought the amalgam to a West at long last ready to reconsider its own values. By different paths, Lennon and Western youth had arrived at a need, Ono at its fulfillment. More justifiably than most lovers, John and Yoko knew, in an instant of enlightenment at the Indica Gallery, that they were of one mind.

### **Ono's Upbringing**

Ono's route to the rendezvous was the more devious of the two. She was born in Tokyo on February 18, 1932, the year Japan set up a puppet state in Manchuria, a long step towards the catastrophe of 1945. Two weeks earlier, her father had been transferred to San Francisco with the Yokohama Specie Bank, the financial arm of Japan's expanding empire. His wife and daughter soon followed, and Yoko from infancy heard both English and Japanese, the foundation of her subsequent bilingualism. In the spring of 1937 as Japan began full-scale war in China Yoko, her mother and younger brother Keisuke, born in December 1936, returned to Tokyo, where Yoko was enrolled in the kindergarten of the Peers' School, a Tokyo institution then open only to relatives of the Imperial family or of members of the House of Peers (her maternal grandfather, the banker Zenjiro Yasuda, had been ennobled in 1915). In 1940 Yoko's mother, fearing that all Japanese might be interned if Japan and the United States went to war and that she might not see him for many years, bravely rejoined her husband, by this time stationed in New York, taking her two children. The family sailed from San Francisco for the last time in the spring of 1941. At the time of Pearl Harbor Yoko's father was working in the Hanoi branch of his bank while Yoko was enrolled in a Christian primary school in Tokyo, run by one of the Mitsui family for Japanese children returned from abroad.

Takasumi Mitsui's school gave Yoko a safe and liberal refuge for most of the war. She continued studying in English and was listed as a primary school student well after her twelfth birthday, when most boys and girls her age became liable for war work, often risky. She was still living in Tokyo and being privately tutored in The Bible, Buddhism and the piano when a quarter of the city was burnt out in the great fire raid of March 9, 1945-- an inferno she survived in the Ono family bunker in the affluent Azabu residential district, far from the incinerated downtown. Only then did her mother move her three children to a small farming village near the still fashionable Karuizawa mountain resort. The choice of refuge proved fortunate, as Yoko and her brother and sister, in the desperate days of the defeat and the collapse of the Japanese economy, were able to help their mother barter

family treasures for food. One notable deal yielded sixty kilograms of life-sustaining rice for a German-made sewing machine. At the end of the war the family returned to Tokyo, where Yoko rejoined the re-opened Peers' School in April 1946.

Founded in Tokyo in 1877, the Peers' School, like its rough equivalents Eton in England and Groton in the United States, has been more noted for social than for academic status. Its campus near the Imperial Palace survived the fire raids more or less intact, and its first post-war intake was like the pre-war ones. When the peerage was abolished in 1947 the school became theoretically open to anyone, including foreign exchange students (a classmate of the present Crown Prince Naruhito was the son of a plumber from Melbourne, Australia) but, like Tokyo itself, the Peers' School has since recovered much of its high-society glitter.

The view from the school windows, however, has changed beyond recognition. When Yoko and her classmates looked outside the school's high walls in the spring of 1946 they saw a city all but returned, as General Curtis E. LeMay Jr., U. S. Army Air Corps, had promised, to the Stone Age. Whole districts were sterile wastelands of twisted iron and blackened stones. People lived in holes clawed in the ground, roofed with stray sheets of metal. On every corner of what had once been shopping streets, famished men and women tried to sell trinkets, clothes, anything for food. Every train from the countryside brought farmers loaded with rice and vegetables for the black market. In makeshift bars in dank cellars, workers formed lines to gulp industrial alcohol. To sharpen the misery, smartly-turned-out, well-fed American soldiers tootled around the ruins in jeeps, driving on the side of the road they were accustomed to, the right-- the rare Japanese vehicle simply got out of the way. In a terminal degradation of Japanese martial values, American servicewomen smiled for souvenir snaps in rickshaws pulled by Japanese men still wearing the tattered remnants of military uniforms, eyes turned down in exhaustion, hunger and shame. Few would have recognized in this desolate scene the seedbed of a great and original flowering of art and cinema-- unless they had seen Berlin in 1919, or Moscow before Stalin.

Japan under occupation was a paradox; democracy imposed by a conqueror under the iron rule of General Douglas MacArthur, "the Macarto," more autocratic than any shogun had been for centuries. The occupation supposedly freed the Japanese press, but two weeks after it began, occupation censorship was imposed, and mention of what had happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for instance, was blue-penciled. The predictable result was to turn the atomic bombs into monstrous symbols of evil, beyond all rational discourse, in which shape they haunt Japanese and the rest of us to this day. Some accused Japanese war criminals were arrested and leisurely trials began; but Emperor Hirohito, who (as all but a handful of the Japanese elite believed) had directed Japan's war in person was free to visit the conqueror-- and the resulting photograph, of a stiffly correct Emperor and a showily casual general, was as ambiguous as the occasion. The trials were intended to show the Japanese their war crimes-- but the Soviet judge was from the nation that still held a half-million Japanese as war prisoners, many never to see homes and families again. Most Tokyo residents, like those of any war-devastated city, were engrossed in the search for food and shelter. Even from an island of privilege like the Peers' School, the world

outside no longer made sense. That America's war had been wholly just ("the justest war in history," U.S. propaganda claimed) and therefore Japan's totally unjust was by no means so clear to these puzzled young people as it was to the victors. Yes, there had been crimes and cruelties, on both sides, and who could strike the balance? And how could these crimes have been averted? The best answer seemed to be that war itself was to blame. Pacifism has been, for Japanese, the most enduring legacy of those years: "make love not war," the slogan of the Western sixties, well expresses the mood of Tokyo in 1946, as of starving Berlin in 1918. Right up to the present, PEACE (a brand of cigarette) and LOVE (with an arrow-pierced heart) are English words almost every Japanese knows.

### **Postwar Pacifism**

More than a half-century on, any Japanese politician who suggests that Japan might one day go to war again is sure of an angry reaction. We have proof, from the Peers' School itself, that pacifism impacted with particular force on Yoko Ono's generation. Prince Akihito, now Emperor of Japan, returned there, as she did, in April 1946 from the same mountain refuge, the Karuizawa area, and saw the same fire-ravaged cityscape from its windows. The Crown Prince was tutored in English and world history by an American, Elizabeth Gray Vining, selected by Emperor Hirohito with full knowledge that her Quaker faith enjoins strict pacifism. Thirty-four years later, when Akihito acceded to the throne he swore to uphold the constitution, the first Japanese emperor ever to do so-- and to Japanese this can only mean Article Nine, renouncing war. One of the new Emperor Akihito's first official duties was to plant a tree in Nagasaki, whose mayor, Hitoshi Motoshima had not long before been shot and seriously injured by a right-wing fanatic after urging Japanese to reflect on their role in World War II, for which, said the mayor, Emperor Hirohito "shared responsibility." Meeting the mayor-- it could not have been by chance-- Hirohito's eldest son wished him a speedy recovery. Within the restraints of his office, Yoko's schoolmate could not have made his abiding pacifist views plainer.

Feminist agitation was more prominent in Japan's early post-war years than it has ever been since. Women were given the vote by the largely American-written 1946 constitution, and pressure from the new female members of parliament finally led in 1958 to the abolition of the licensed brothels, into which poor girls had been sold into debt slavery. The law-making adultery a crime for wives but not for husbands was repealed in 1947. A few professions, notably teaching, introduced equal pay. However, the feminism that reverberated in the Japan of the post-war years was less ideological than situational, the feminism of hard times. War, especially in Japan, has been a hyper-masculine pursuit, with the homoeroticism found in all military societies.

The utter defeat of 1945 temporarily, perhaps permanently, discredited the warrior ethos. Strong, resourceful women like Yoko Ono's mother, who had kept homes and families afloat through eight years of war saw Japan's surrender as simply another man-made crisis to be somehow survived. Thousands of Japanese women, "pan pan girls," prostituted themselves to American soldiers, often for food for their families. Others hired out as the victors' maids, cooks and nannies. In close to a millennium, only one part of the English-speaking world has known such total defeat. Novelist Margaret Mitchell, in *Scarlett*

O'Hara, imagined a strong woman's response to the shipwreck of Southern male pretensions very like the reaction of many Japanese women in 1945. In *Woman is the Nigger of the World* by Yoko Ono and John Lennon, we can hear, behind the offensive racial slur, the anger of a privileged girl at what her humbler sisters had once had to do, just for survival.

One of the first arts to revive in Japan was cinema, by which a mass audience could be reached for the price of a seat in a drafty hall. The great director Akira Kurosawa had a script in shape for his enigmatic *Rashomon* as early as 1947, although he took until 1950 to find finance and finish it. Its theme, the impossibility of arriving at reliable truth about any event by way of the self-serving distortions of witnesses and participants, was a plain parable of Japan's situation. The first voice to speak from within defeated Japan and be heard outside, *Rashomon* began the process, still incomplete, of explaining the pariah nation to a suspicious world. Kurosawa had added an important aside to the bleak vision of Ryunosuke Akutagawa, who wrote the two stories on which it is partly based and suicided, at thirty-five, in 1927. Kurosawa's addition has the woodcutter, one of the witnesses whose version of the rape of a samurai's wife and the murder of her husband by a bandit cannot be trusted, adopt a baby abandoned by the ruined city gate which gives the film its name. Life, says the film, goes on, the human spirit rebounds, there is always hope. A quarter-century later, John Lennon was to climb a ladder at the Indica Gallery and through a magnifying glass read the one word Yoko Ono had written on the gallery's ceiling, YES. "At least" Lennon later recalled, "her message was positive."

Kurosawa apart (*Rashomon* won the gold cup at the 1950 Venice film festival and became an international hit) all that the outside world heard from Japan in the immediate post-war years came through the propaganda megaphone operated by the U.S. occupation. MacArthur's headquarters censored not only what the Japanese media reported in Japan, but what the corps of foreign correspondents stationed in Tokyo could send to their readers. The publication of John Hersey's searing *Hiroshima* (1946), the century's most influential piece of journalism, was only possible because Hersey wrote it in the offices of the *New Yorker*, far from the occupation's censors.

The year 1945 in fact marked the sharpest discontinuity between generations in all Japanese history, but few outside Japan could distinguish this reality from the claims of MacArthur's personal publicity machine-- and, as with all such breaks with the past, much continued unchanged, and a reverse current soon set in, guided by the same occupation authority. What many Japanese still remember as the years of post-war democracy all too soon ended. The role in the world assigned to Japan was changing. In 1949 the Soviets broke the U.S. nuclear monopoly, the Chinese Communist Party won its civil war, and the Korean War broke out in June 1950. Already the occupation had begun its "reverse course." No longer an enemy to be punished and reformed, Japan became a potential ally to be courted for the threatened new world war with communism. Korean war spending, the opening of the huge U.S. market to Japanese products, the revival of Japan's wartime production system with its close ties between banks, bureaucrats and favored industrialists-- the celebrated "Japan Inc."-- got Japan back on the dual road to economic recovery and social counter-revolution.

Good times, however, are not necessarily propitious for the arts. By 1951, when Yoko Ono graduated from the Peers' School, the creative ferment of the postwar years was subsiding, as everyday Japan settled down to take advantage of the "reverse course" and its material payoffs. Feminism stalled, Japan's new pacifism was entangled in the alliance with the nuclear-armed U.S. Early in 1952 Yoko was accepted by the philosophy faculty of her school's associated Peers' University as its first female student of that most cerebral of disciplines, but after two semesters she dropped out. Approaching her twentieth birthday, her most impressionable years behind her, Ono rejoined her family in Scarsdale, New York, where her father was once again a banker. She enrolled in nearby Sarah Lawrence College, then strong in the visual arts (painter Bradley Walker Tomlin had taught abstract expressionism there). This led her to American avant-garde circles, where she experimented with painting, music, film and the various performance arts. By 1962 she was back in Tokyo, exhibiting with some success as a member of the Japanese artistic avant-garde, some of whom called themselves Neo-Dadaists, part of the Dada stylistic revival taking place world-wide.

The original Dada (from French baby-talk "dada," a rocking-horse, a word intended to be meaningless) had arisen first in sidelined, neutral Zurich during the First World War. By 1918 it had spread to Berlin, then to Paris and later to New York. Taking a hint from Marcel Duchamp, who had exhibited a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool as an artwork in 1913, the Dadaists hoped, by exhibiting themeless objects, to condemn the futility of war and to shock the bourgeoisie out of the materialism and complacency the artists believed had exacerbated its horrors. Dada attracted some attention in the European cities plunged into something like the despair of Tokyo in 1945, but by 1924 that war was receding, the bourgeoisie were again complacent, and the Dada movement, bereft of social concern, had retreated into style.

As Japan's America-oriented prosperity grew into the early 1960's, the Japanese neo-Dada movement became similarly fragmented and dispirited. Resistance to the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty (ANPO), mostly from students, attracted some of its practitioners; as did opposition to the 1964 Olympics, seen by most Japanese as a milestone in Japan's revival; anti-materialism inspired such notable art as Genpei Akasegawa's Great Japan Zero-Yen Note, mocking the preoccupation of most of his compatriots. But the creative despair of the late 1940's was long gone. Via two failed marriages and a parting from her only daughter, Kyoko, claimed by her American ex-husband Anthony Cox, Yoko again left Japan eventually to find her way to a small London gallery specializing in the avant-garde, then beginning to find the wider audience it always does in times of social upheaval. It took the aristocratic Ono some time to discover what the untutored, instinctual Lennon really had to offer her-- the wide world, as an audience for her art.

### **Lennon's Trajectory**

How had John Lennon reached his side of the mysteriously fated rendezvous at the Indica Gallery in 1966? Born in 1940, his adolescence, the 'fifties, was a time of self-satisfaction in the English-speaking world, of growing affluence, of endless war movies presenting the victors as supermen (but not yet as superwomen-- just as war had deflated the male values

of Japanese, it inflated those of the Western winners, whose women were ejected from the jobs they had held while the men were away fighting, and theoretically went back to being full-time housewives and mothers).

Prosperity not known since the 1920's did little for adult women, but a great deal economically for adolescents, now called "teenagers," who commanded real wages and competitively bigger parental allowances in economies finally freed of unemployment. Teenage purchasing power made a new market for records, and the performers correspondingly rich-- none richer than the Fab Four from England, the Beatles. The Beatles owed their huge success to a creative tension between John Lennon and Paul McCartney, who wrote most of their songs-- Paul the syrupy and tuneful, John the tart realist. Advised by their astute manager, Brian Epstein, to present a wholesome image unthreatening to British parents, the Beatles were made Members of the Order of the British Empire (a medal usually given to civil servants like postmasters) in 1965, and they duly acquired wholesome girlfriends and/or wives to suit. With a blonde English wife, Cynthia, and an infant son, Julian, Lennon later described feeling "trapped" in "a happily married state of boredom." Money had never been his main motivation-- rather, as wordsmith and intellectual of the partnership, he sought self-expression, meaning expressing the feelings of his contemporaries, the normal rebellion of any generation against the one before it, delayed for Lennon and those who thought like him by the huge (and not unjustified) self-satisfaction of their elders who had won the war, the peace and in their own minds, the game of life itself.

Aimless, shapeless discontent among young people who felt themselves overshadowed and marginalized by the war generation had already inspired James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), Alan Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). These one-offs by unknown outsiders, meaningless to mainstream adults, could be ignored-- whereas the Beatles were the Western establishment's own lovable young rascals, with teenage followers in just about every English-speaking home. All that remained to complete the radicalization of youth in the later 'sixties was a new war, a spectacular crisis calling for immediate public action.

I happened to be in Vietnam, covering the first big search-and-destroy operations by American regular troops, in the very same month that Yoko met John. War was again a front-page, news-dominating story. After an on-again, off-again courtship, Lennon left his wife and their posh stockbroker-belt country mansion and set up house with Yoko in a London flat. In 1968 they released *Unfinished Music #1: Two Virgins*, a collage of electronic sound recorded on their first night together, with a self-shot nude photograph of the couple on the cover. They married in March 1969, promising to stage many "happenings." The wedding was the first, followed by "Bed Peace" in an Amsterdam hotel, then the huge billboard in Times Square, New York: "WAR IS OVER-- if you want it." The two Lennons had become the emblematic leaders of a universal cultural revolution. Long matured, the preoccupations of Yoko Ono's vivid Tokyo adolescence had meshed with John Lennon's energies, and given his showy, empty life a sense of purpose, and her art a world audience. Like the o's in Yoko Ono, another train of political and artistic wheels had at last come full circle.

MURRAY SAYLE, an Australian writer long resident in Japan, contributed this account of the intellectual origins of Yoko Ono, in slightly different form, to the catalogue of the multimedia retrospective “YES YOKO ONO,” which opened at the Japan Society Gallery, New York, on October 16, 2000. The exhibition, curated by Alexandra Munroe, director of the gallery, in consultation with Jon Hendricks, curator of the Yoko Ono archive, is scheduled to tour the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston; the List Center for Visual Arts, Cambridge, Massachusetts; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; and may travel to Asia. We thank the Japan Society and Ms. Munroe for permission to reproduce the essay as a JPRI Occasional Paper.

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