

reimagine peace

yoko ono

YOKO ONO, *IMAGINE PEACE*, 2003, INSTALLATION VIEW, NEW YORK, 2017, COURTESY CREATIVE TIME, PHOTO GUILLAUME ZICcarelli



a voice for peace

YOKO ONO, *PEACE IS POWER*, 2017, INSTALLATION VIEW AT NOBEL PEACE CENTER, OSLO, NORWAY, 2023, PHOTO CHRISTIAN TUNGE, NOBEL PEACE CENTER



YOKO ONO, *I LOVE YOU EARTH*, 1985, INSTALLATION VIEW, LONDON, 2022, COURTESY CIRCA ART, PHOTO GEORGE DARRELL



YOKO ONO AND JOHN LENNON, *WAR IS OVER! IF YOU WANT IT*, 1969, AND YOKO ONO, *IMAGINE PEACE*, 2003, INSTALLATION VIEW IN TIMES SQUARE, NEW YORK, 2009, COPYRIGHT YOKO ONO LENNON

silence, resistance, tenacity, gentleness yoko ono

by jérôme sans

Silence, resistance, tenacity, gentleness – a lifetime of artistic engagement for peace. *Imagine Peace* is a work by the Japanese artist Yoko Ono that the world seems destined to continue hearing. Not because the artist doubts her own affirmation, or because she is searching for herself, but because the world still has not fully understood this work. Because the world keeps shattering our fragile peace and forever rekindling eternal conflicts. For more than half a century, the artist has been repeating this message. She repeats it with gentleness and obstinacy. She repeats it in newspapers, on city walls, projected in the sky, on screens, and on the volcanic stones of islands. She repeats it in 24 languages, so that no one can claim not to have heard the message. She tirelessly repeats these two words: “Imagine peace.” Two words, an injunction. A verdict of collective failure and, simultaneously, a most beautiful form of resistance.

Yoko Ono was born in Tokyo in 1933, into a family of the Japanese upper bourgeoisie. A child of war, she was 12 years old when the atomic bombs fell on Japan; she grew up between Tokyo and New York, between two cultures, two languages, two ways of inhabiting the world. She studied philosophy at Gakushuin University, then settled permanently in New York in the early 1950s, where she immersed herself in the city’s avant-garde scene. It was there, at the heart of the Fluxus movement and the nascent conceptual art world, that she forged a radically new practice: an art of instruction, participation, and collective imagination.

In 1964, Ono published *Grapefruit*, a book of poetic instructions, a series of protocols inviting the reader to mentally activate improbable works. “Light a match and watch till it goes out.” Or: “Leave a canvas or a finished painting on the floor or in the street.” This conceptual manifesto foreshadowed everything that would follow.

It was in this same spirit that she developed, at the heart of the New York avant-garde of the 1960s, “Howling,” an experimental vocal practice in which the voice, freed from all rules, becomes pure cry. A howl directed at the world, a raw expression of pain, anger, and freedom. Where song traditionally seeks to please through structured melody, “Howling” by contrast is unstructured, improvised, and proposes a disarticulation of language. A practice close to vocal primitivism or the ritual cry, expressing a form of liberation that is at once bodily

and psychic. This cry, which many found deeply unsettling, already foreshadowed everything Ono would make of her life: refusing established forms, choosing invention over convention, and making the body itself an instrument of resistance, an instrument of liberation.

The story goes that it was in 1966, during an exhibition by Ono at the Indica Gallery in London, that she met the musician John Lennon. Lennon later reflected on his encounter with Ono’s work *Ceiling Painting/Yes Painting*: “I climbed the ladder and picked up the magnifying glass, and I was swinging up there, and in tiny little letters it said: ‘Yes.’ And that’s what made me stay.”

Between the Japanese avant-garde artist and the most intellectual of The Beatles, an artistic and romantic partnership was born, one that would transform them both. Their relationship initially appeared turbulent in the eyes of the world, with Ono accused of breaking up The Beatles, of having led Lennon astray, of being too strange, too radical, too different... These accusations say less about her than about the era, and about the way the world still treats women who dare to speak up. For what Ono brought to Lennon was a field that reached far beyond pop music: an entire conceptual language, a radicality, a political commitment, and a way of making art the way one makes war – or rather, the way one makes peace. Together, they invented a new form of artistic activism, where the form mattered as much as the outcome, where the absurd intertwined with the provocative, where bodies became the protagonists of a bedroom transformed into a theatrical stage.

In 1969, Yoko Ono and John Lennon turned their honeymoon into a political gesture. Lying in bed at the Amsterdam Hilton Hotel, they refused to get up for a week in protest for peace. *Bed-in for Peace* was a radical gesture, misunderstood by many at the time, but one that left its mark on history. In the context of the Vietnam War, they developed together a series of posters displayed across 11 cities around the world, aptly titled: *War Is Over! If You Want It*. Not quite a consolation, it was more of a gentle accusation, for if war continues, it is also because we allow it to. We are still not capable of living together. Then in 1971, the legendary Beatle’s song “Imagine” was itself the result of Ono’s influence on Lennon. The song’s lyrics echo the protocols Ono had written in *Grapefruit*: “Imagine the clouds dripping. Dig a hole in your garden to put them in.” Shortly before his

assassination, Lennon acknowledged the direct influence of the book on the lyrics of “Imagine,” and in 2017, Ono was finally credited as cowriter of the song.

After a few years away from the public eye, Ono and Lennon resumed their musical collaboration with their album *Double Fantasy* in 1980. On December 8, 1980, Lennon, returning from a recording session, was shot and killed in front of his New York apartment building before Ono’s eyes. While this event brought a fruitful collaboration to an abrupt end, Ono nonetheless continued on her own path.

She continued to advocate for peace and poetry across the world, and dedicated a work to her late husband. Since 2007, between October 9, Lennon’s birthday, and December 8, the day of his death, the *Imagine Peace Tower* illuminates the sky from the island of Viðey, near Reykjavík, Iceland. It is not a tower in the architectural sense of the word; rather, it is an empty tower, made entirely of light. On this monument of white stones, the words “Imagine Peace” are engraved in 24 languages. From this base, 16 high-powered projectors emit a vertical beam of white light pointing toward the stars, reaching four kilometers in altitude, visible from dozens of kilometers around. Dedicated to the memory of the musician and to the commitment for peace, Ono transforms light into a symbol of hope, and makes the words of a song – now a pacifist anthem – resonate far beyond all borders. The work cannot be sold, cannot be hung on a wall, cannot be owned. It rises every year, like a reminder, like a tender reproach addressed to all of humanity.

The *Imagine Peace* project extends far beyond Iceland. Since the early 2000s, Ono has undertaken a widespread international dissemination of these two words. This dissemination takes many forms, from highly visible installations in public spaces to the most viral modes of reproduction: billboards in major cities around the world, newspaper inserts, flags flying in the wind, online campaigns, invitations to submit personal wishes for peace on a participatory website, public events across every continent, ink stamps... *Imagine Peace* becomes a kind of international artistic campaign of multiple forms – at once public art, participatory activism, performance, and poetry. With each appearance, these two words in bold black letters on a brilliant white background immediately capture our attention. Seeing them and reading them feels unavoidable.

The words become a concept and invade the world to actively fight against violence. In doing so, *Imagine Peace* has left a deep mark on the history of art, demonstrating that conceptual art, participatory art, performance art, and activist art can converge into a single gesture – at once simple and absolute: imagining peace. A gesture that belongs to no one because it belongs to everyone. A gesture that forces us to confront the current state of a world not yet at peace. A gesture that makes it impossible to look away from ongoing violence, or to persist in denial.

Imagine Peace is a work in progress – deliberately, constitutionally unfinished. A struggle that does not stop. Like the “Instruction Pieces” in *Grapefruit*, *Imagine Peace* cannot exist without the participation of the public. The work is incomplete without us. It summons us. It casts us as coauthors, and above all, it holds us responsible. To imagine peace is already to act for it, for thought itself is a form of creative action. Ono once stated: “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... The job of an artist is not to destroy but to change the value of things. And by doing that, artists can change the world into a Utopia where there is total freedom for everybody. That can be achieved only when there is total communication in the world. Total communication equals peace. That is our aim. That is what artists can do for the world!” By subverting the methods of protest and advertising with

two simple words, at once poetic and peaceful, *Imagine Peace* literally and metaphorically disarms the reader, transforming the real world into a utopia, freed from violence and conflict. What might seem, at first glance, like a political slogan, reveals itself more clearly as a mantra, a prayer we must repeat tirelessly until we truly make it our own. An invitation to rethink about peace. *Imagine Peace* calls upon imagination in its deepest sense: the capacity to picture what does not yet exist, to desire it strongly enough to make it real.

Today, as the world is once again torn by international conflicts and war has once more become the backdrop of our daily lives, *Imagine Peace* takes on a prophetic dimension. Ono is not merely an artist. She embodies, across decades and disasters, the unyielding ambassador of peace. A peace that begins in each person’s imagination before quietly unfolding into the world. For as Ono herself declares: “Imagining is something we can all do, even if we have different opinions on how to get there.”

What the work upholds, in its very repetition across the world, is that peace is never guaranteed. Peace is not a natural state toward which humanity spontaneously tends to gravitate. It is a choice. A difficult, daily, counterintuitive choice in a world that glorifies strength and domination. Peace requires courage – and a willingness that must be renewed as many times as necessary. It rests on a faith in humanity, on the capacity to believe in one another and to invent, despite our differences, the conditions for a shared coexistence. And if Ono has been repeating this mantra for so long, it is because there are truths that were not heard the first time. That our differences are not our weakness. That they are also our strength. That peace, like love, must be spoken and repeated, plastered everywhere, shouted if necessary, inscribed in the sky and in stone, projected toward the stars from an island of lava and silence, until the world, at last, deigns to listen.

Meanwhile, the world burns. Not metaphorically. Literally. Borders close, old hatreds reopen, ancient wars reignite like embers we thought had gone cold. In Gaza, in Ukraine, in Lebanon, and tomorrow, elsewhere. Fires are lighting up across every corner of the Earth with a regularity that should terrify us and that, too often, merely numbs us. Perhaps that is the true challenge of *Imagine Peace* today: no longer to convince, but to awaken. To keep the flame alive in a world saturated with images of destruction, where outrage has a shelf life of 48 hours and where collective memory drowns in the feed.

Imagine peace. Not as a wishful thought. Not as a beautiful phrase carved in stone. As an urgency. As an act of daily resistance, in a world that seems to have chosen, again and again, the other option.

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