

Get Back, Yoko Ono, and the Art of Performance

JANE BARTER

In 1964, two years before she met John Lennon, Yoko Ono exhibited *Cut Piece*, one of the earliest works of feminist performance art. For *Cut Piece*, Ono wore a suit and knelt onstage with only a pair of scissors accompanying her. During the performance, Ono remained still as audience members approached and cut pieces of her suit until she was stripped bare. Audience members were told they could keep the piece of fabric they had severed from her garment. This performance was a re-enactment of the multiple forms of stripping and fetishizing to which women's (and particularly Asian women's) bodies were subjected. It also hearkened to images of garments torn asunder after the atomic bombs were dropped on Ono's native Japan. As Julia Bryan-Wilson put it: "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*" (Bryan-Wilson 2003).



Photo: Minoru Niizuma. Courtesy of Yoko Ono.
© Minoru Niizuma 2015

Yoko Ono. *Cut Piece* (1964) performed by Yoko Ono in *New Works of Yoko Ono*, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York, March 21, 1965.

Throughout the performance, Ono's equanimity spoke to another form of being stripped bare, to a form of surrender that is not merely passive and empty but represents an artistic vision and a woman's integrity that exceed the cutters' shears. In the 1966 artist's statement on the piece, Ono wrote:

"People went on cutting the parts they do not like of me finally there was only the stone remained of me that was in me but they were still not satisfied and wanted to know what it's like in the stone." (Yoko Ono, "Biography/Statement." *The Stone*. New York: Judson Galler, 1966)

Watching Peter Jackson's eight-hour documentary, *Get Back*, was a little like seeking to know what it's like inside the stone after the cutters left. For over fifty years, the public has attempted to sever Ono with the sharp instruments of racism and misogyny. *Get Back* has done much to correct this and to expose the pernicious mythologies upon which the general animus against Ono was built. We now know, to quote Paul McCartney, "[the Beatles did not break up because Yoko sat on an amp.](#)" But do we know her any better? According to many commentators, we do. Since the release of *Get Back*, Ono's true nature, and her chief virtue apparently, have now been revealed. According to Dani Di Placido of [Forbes Magazine](#):

[V]iewers were surprised to see how unintrusive Ono's presence is during the recording sessions seen on *Get Back*; while the boys were jamming, she can be seen reading the newspaper, knitting, or helpfully rolling joints.

Peter Jackson himself offers these remarks in a recent [Sixty Minutes](#) interview:

She never has opinions about the stuff they're doing. She never says, 'Oh, I think the previous take was better than that one.' She's a very benign presence and she doesn't interfere in the slightest.

It takes a singular (and decidedly masculine) lack of imagination to view Yoko Ono in 1969 as merely unintrusive or benign or without opinion. At this time, Ono was at the height of her career, exhibiting internationally, and widely recognized as one of the great visionaries of performance art. To regard her as the sideshow to the jamming boys, the girlfriend sitting on the amp, is to cut once again at a figure. Although she is omnipresent throughout the eight-hour documentary, she evidently remains as concealed today as she was during those first impressions when she was introduced to popular culture.

Ono remarked that, throughout her art, she was "searching for an emptiness that is not empty" ([Brackett](#), 2017), a vision that is thoroughly influenced by her

Zen Buddhist background. Her performance on *Get Back* is often inscrutable, and yet in its inscrutability it interrupts the comfortable narrative of the boys jamming while the "girlfriends" look passively on. Throughout her career, Ono blurred the boundaries between art and life, and we should view her performance on *Get Back* (which, for all its seeming immediacy, was a thoroughly mediated production," [a documentary about a documentary](#)," as Jackson calls it) as consistent with her overarching aesthetic vision. Her emptiness is never empty. As Amanda Hess wrote in a [brilliant article for the New York Times](#):

"Ono simply never leaves. She refuses to decamp to the sidelines, but she also resists acting out stereotypes; she appears as neither a doting naïf nor a needling busybody. Instead she seems engaged in a kind of passive resistance, defying all expectations of women who enter the realm of rock genius."



Photo: Jas Smith

March 1969—John Lennon and Yoko Ono stayed in their room for seven days at the Hilton Hotel, Amsterdam.

After the recording of the *Let it Be* album, Ono and Lennon would display the power of passive resistance through their [Bed-Ins](#) in Amsterdam and Montreal. This time her performance art would protest another war that was mutilating Asian bodies: the war in Vietnam. The *Bed-In* was contingent upon the transformative exchange between artist/performers and audience/participant. If you can think peace together, it can be. One did not need a strategy to create the conditions of peace. The conditions for peace, as the conditions of violence, are available already within the flesh, within the self, and particularly in the encounter between enfleshed selves. Much of this message was lost in the controversy that the *Bed-Ins* engendered, but that, too, was part of Ono's vision. To display the quotidian act of lying around in bed, reading the newspaper, sipping coffee, was a disarming and entirely unexpected way to speak of peace during a senseless war which had become an endless spectacle of violence. As Ono stated:

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 removed from establishment-type thinking that the establishment doesn't know how to fight back.

(Ono, cited in [Julia Bryan-Wilson](#) , 2003)

Both *Cut Piece* and *Bed-In* sought to break down the boundaries between art and life, and between performers/artists and audience/viewers. They also sought to invite the audience to engage in an imaginative exercise. In the former, to experience the violence of war, racism, and sexism; in the latter, to participate in the quotidian experience of peaceful exchange.

Read thus, the *Bed-Ins* are the performative antitheses to *Cut Piece*. They were an enactment of rendering whole, of healing, and of restoration. If this is so, then the old and tired story of the Beatles' breakup is at long last turned on its head, but in a far more profound way than Peter Jackson's renarration in *Get Back*. For the larger and more interesting story than that of a great rock band breaking up is that of bodies, once torn apart, becoming whole. Over fifty years ago, a great artist named Yoko Ono dared to imagine this. We are still longing for its performance.

War is over (if we want it).



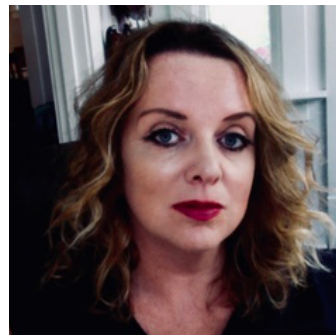
A LONG STANDING TRADITION

The Only Funeral Home Owned and Operated by the Bardal Family

neil bardal
FUNERAL CENTRE

Call: (204) **949-2200**
neilbardalinc.com
info@neilbardal.mb.ca

One Winnipeg Location Only
Across from Brookside Cemetery
3030 Notre Dame Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3H 1B9



Jane Barter is a priest in the Diocese of Rupert's Land, who is currently serving St. Peter, Dynevor (Selkirk), St. Philip (Hodgson), and St. Matthew (Peguis). She is also Professor of Religion and Culture at The University of Winnipeg.