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Faculty of Design

Department of Visual Communication

All we are Saying

The Art of John Lennon with Yoko Ono

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I wish to thank Gerard Walker for his assistance with this thesis, and the National College of Art & Design Library Staff.

Table of Contents

List of Plates

Introduction

There has never been a more ripe time for a detailed analysis of the visual, literary and conceptual artistic output of John Lennon. It is a body of work that was largely ignored during the time of its creation, being, as it was, overshadowed by Lennon's persona as an international music superstar. Almost two decades after his death, and three decades after the breakup of The Beatles, there is a climate at the moment, and has been for some years, of revaluation and celebration of the phenomenon of Lennon and the Fab Four. It makes sense for this to be the time for an evaluation of the huge amount of artistic creation produced by Lennon, the stigma of his stardom having passed into legend, allowing for a frank, untethered appreciation without jaundice. Little has been written, even now, by way of analysis and appreciation of this subject, or on the influence Yoko Ono exerted on John Lennon's artistic life.

In chapter one, I will briefly examine Lennon's early life and education, followed by a look at his first major efforts at art creation outside the world of The Beatles, the books *In His Own Write* and *A Spaniard In The Works*. In chapter two, I will catalogue Lennon's abandonment of this outlet for his creativity in favour of more art-orientated music, and introduce Yoko Ono, covering her background, her association with the Fluxus art movement and important work. The third chapter will concern John Lennon and Yoko Ono's collaboration as husband and wife artists, examining the performances and events organised by the two. Chapter four will look at Lennon's return to illustration and also his experimental film projects with Yoko Ono and will address whether their collaboration was successful to the effect of cementing Lennon's identity as a bona-fide *artist*.

As I have noted, little has been written on this subject, and much of this thesis' analysis stems from my own readings of Lennon's work. My thesis is not about The Beatles, but it would be impossible to write about John Lennon without mentioning the band, not the least as a counterpoint to his artist persona. As such, several Beatles texts have been invaluable in the research for this thesis, as have biographies of Lennon and Yoko Ono.

In this thesis, the most important aspect is the documentation and analysis of the work of one of the worlds most famous least known artists, John Lennon.

"The Writing Beatle!"

> There are bound to be thickheads who will wonder why some of it doesn't make sense, and others who will search for hidden meanings. 'What's a Brummer?'
> 'There's more to 'dubb owld boot' than meets the eye.'
> None of it has to make sense and if it seems funny then that's enough.
> P.S. I like the drawings too.
> -Paul McCartney , introduction to *In His Own Write.*

By the time John Lennon had published his first anthology of stories, poetry and drawings, *In His Own Write*, in 1964, The Beatles were rapidly becoming a world wide musical phenomenon. In the month of the book's release, The Beatles held the top five positions in the US charts, and the recently - termed effect "Beatlemania", being the frenzy that the band and their music inspired in their young fans, was an everyday reality for each member of the group. With a sound that was new and exciting, The Beatles were purveyors of sugary lovesongs that were wrapped in beautiful harmonies and melodies. Lennon and Paul McCartney were the group's principal songwriters, and the triteness of the "sad-glad" type lyrics was often completely disguised by their keen ability, with the aid of their producer and sometime musical mentor, George Martin, to compose such sweet sounding harmonic delights. It would not be until some years later when the two would explore the possibilities of lyric writing to a fuller and often darker, more intellectual effect. In the introduction to the republished and repackaged edition of Lennon's two anthologies, *In His Own Write* and *A Spaniard In The Works*, Jon Savage sums up the disparity between Lennon's "diamond rings" lyrical output, and his literary efforts as

> What you get is an alternative take on The Beatle's public sweetness and light: sick parodies, surreal low life tales, vengeful attacks on the media. Nobody is spared.
> -Savage, 1997, page vii

Ian MacDonald, in his seminal Beatles analysis, *Revolution In The Head*, wrote that

> the eminent journalist, Kenneth Allsop, whom Lennon admired, challenged him as to why his songs didn't employ the acerbic wordplay of his books.
> -MacDonald, 1995, page 136

Lennon would soon follow suit on subsequent Beatles records, inspired by the emergence of one Bob Dylan as a voice of the youth. Dylan's reactionary folk songs, while being overshadowed in musical and harmonic brilliance by the Beatles output, lyrically outshone anything Lennon and McCartney had produced to date, and appealed to John Lennon's cynicism and darker nature. Beatles fans would only have had evidence of this through slightly barbed press conference jokes, (for example, on the occasion of the band's first visit to the United States, when asked to sing a song at a press conference, Lennon replied, "No...we need money first") or through reading his books.

But before The Beatles, and all the baggage that came with it, indeed before any of the group's earlier incarnations (The Quarrymen, Johhny and the Moondogs, Silver Beatles), and before the phenomenon of Rock n' Roll that changed the course of his life, John Lennon exhibited leanings toward the literary and artistic world. According to Geoffrey Giuliano in his book *The Beatles: A Celebration*

> John's first school was Dovetail Primary . He was a cheerful boy, full of fun and mischief, who impressed both schoolmates and teachers with his natural leadership and naughty sense of adventure. He was also quite creative. By the age of seven he was even writing his own books. One of them, 'Sport, Speed and Illustrated. Edited and Illustrated by J.W Lennon,'contained a witty collection of poems, caricatures and short stories that hinted at his talent as a writer with a keen sense of the absurd.
> -Giuliano, 1986, page 14

If Lennon's early forays into satire and mischief were encouraged at such an

early age, by the time he was attending Quarrybank Grammar School in Liverpool he came up against the first of many frustrations that would pepper his later attempts to become an accepted and admired artist and writer. Lennon's attitude and tendency toward his own form of literary and visual satire had little or no place in his immediate environment, and this dichotomy is summed up in Giuliano's book as

> consistent academic failure and random creative achievement of a young man struggling with the seed of genius sown in the soil of middle class conformity.
> -Giuliano, 1986, page 17

Lennon's frustrations would later be somewhat relieved by his discovery of Rock n' Roll music as a means of rebellion and statement. At the time the stultifying atmosphere of life at Quarrybank and at home under the care of his Aunt Mimi could only arouse feeling s of resentment and further Lennon's desire to poke fun at the establishment. Looking at his early artistic output can give some indication of the increasing cuttingness that emerged in Lennon in the face of this conformity. Figures 1 to 4 are water colours painted when the artist was between the ages of eleven and twelve. While being rather accomplished for such a young age, the subject matter and stylistic qualities of the work are straightforward and possibly a little laboured. The rigidity of the forms in the portrait, (fig 2) and football scene (fig 4), betray none of the fluidity that would underpin his later drawings. The work, above all, is that of an aspiring young artist, similar, I'm sure to much of what many students would be producing at that early stage. It is by looking at some slightly later work, some of Lennon's earliest caricatures, that we can see the emergence of a personality in the pieces, albeit a slightly jaundiced and cruel one. Figures 5 to 11 are drawings from a period when Lennon would have felt the full brunt of his frustration, at the age of fifteen while attending Quarrybank. He is quoted in Giuliano's book as saying

> People like me are aware of their so-called genius even as a kid. Didn't they see that I was cleverer than anyone else in the school? And that the teachers were stupid, too? I used to say to me Auntie, "You throw my bloody poetry out and you'll regret it when I'm famous, " and she threw the stuff out! I never forgave her for not treating me like a genius when I was a child. Why didn't they train me? Why did they

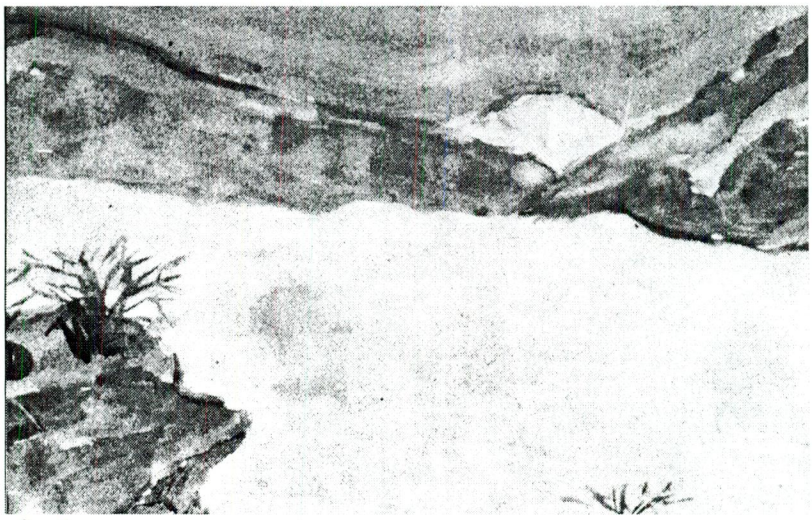


fig 1

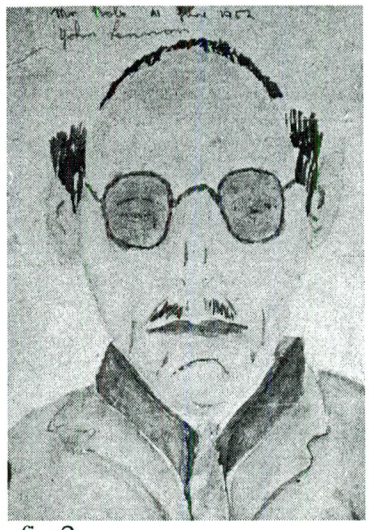


fig 2

fig 3

fig 4

> keep forcing me to be a cowboy like the rest of them? I was different. I was always different Why didn't anybody notice me?
> -Giuliano, 1986, page 17

Lennon's irritation could be seen as the roots of his tendency to strike out; at the establishment, at loved ones, at critics. As I have noted, he possessed a mischievous nature, that, coupled with this frustration, made for a nasty mixture that is redeemed by the skill with which Lennon unleashed it. Early manifestations of his cutting observational style can be seen in the images presented in figures 5 to 8. "No one is spared" wrote Jon Savage in the introduction to *In His Own Write and A Spaniard In The Works,* and here, the targets include individuals from Lennon's immediate environment; his friend Ivan Vaughan's mother (fig 6), characters from his school and Liverpool home (figs 5,7,8,9 & 11), and even his estranged father (fig 6). Lennon's abandonment first by his father when he was three and then his mother at four years old, and the death of his beloved uncle George, who had essentially raised him along with his wife Mimi, when he was thirteen, can only have hardened his nature, and cemented his "hard-done-by" attitude. Geoffrey Giuliano states that

> His Aunt Mimi believes it was George's sudden death that strengthened John's early resolve to isolate himself emotionally from things too personal or painful for his sensitive, artistic psyche to handle.
> -Giuliano, 1986, page 14

So, it is important to note that in the intervening years between his initial artistic output and that portrayed in figures 5 to 11, Lennon suffered both the personal loss of a close relative, and endured the unrelenting rejection of his work. Taking into account that they are the work of a disgruntled fifteen year old boy, the caricatures lack the former accepted stylistic and artistic sensibilities, and instead are crude, hastily achieved, and as a result, far more immediate. On one level, they are the sketchbook crudities of a teenager, yet on another, they show a desire to get a message across, albeit a bitter one, with no artistic niceties, in as abrupt and offensive and witty manner possible. This spontaneity and quickness of approach is important to note here, as it would become the cornerstone of Lennon's visual art output in later years.

fig 5

fig 6

fig 7

fig 8

fig 9

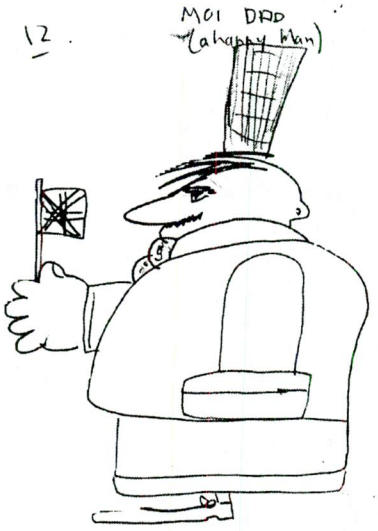


fig 10

fig 11

Lennon's other outlet for his frustrations at the time was the news letter he self-produced in school called *The Daily Howl.* Here was "printed" for the first time, the style of writing and stories that would later be compiled, with accompanying illustrations, in his two anthologies. *The Daily Howl* was collected together of sketchbooks and stories, inspired, as Lennon was, by influences as diverse as Lewis Carroll and "The Goon Show." In his book, *Come Together: John Lennon In His Time,* American author Jon Weiner states that

> The Daily Howl' was not, however, a private world for John. He read it aloud at school to his friends. He needed an audience for this side of his imagination too.
> -Wiener, 1995, page 76

So, "a natural leader," Lennon was keen to show his distaste at the world and his ability for wordplay to anyone who would listen.

All the while Lennon was in Quarrybank, his academic progress deteriorated as his ability to write and caricature both in words and image improved. Peter Brown, a Beatle "insider", attributes the rapid decline of John's school career as being spurred by the influence of his mother, Julia. who had made a reappearance in Lennon's life as he neared the end of his academic life.(*The Love You Make,* MacMillan, 1983)

> He grew more violent and contemptuous of authority, and there were telephone calls to Mimi almost every day now. Frequent canings seemed to have no effect on him....Eventually John was suspended from school for a week, which was considered to be the harshest and most shameful punishment short of expelling him...At sixteen he failed all his O levels and came last in his class of twenty.
> -Brown, Gaines, 1983, page 18

Despite this somewhat shoddy academic record, Lennon's headmaster arranged for an interview for the Liverpool Art College. He achieved entry in the autumn of 1957. Shortly afterward, Lennon's interest in art waned in the face of the new musical sensation that had swept across America and was now arriving at British shores. It could be said that Rock n' Roll, while, for

the most part, being lyrically simplistic and trite, made statements about youth, life, vibrancy, and the establishment in the same spontaneous and thrown-together fashion that Lennon's literary and artistic efforts had been making. While Rock n' Roll harboured little of the cynicism and bitterness that resided in Lennon, its brashness , novelty and immediacy appealed to Lennon at a fundamental level, leaving any interest in pursuing an artistic career for dust. According to Peter Brown's book

> John would listen to Radio Luxembourg every night on a cheap wireless in his bedroom, galvanised by the faint, crackling sounds of rock and roll.
> -Brown, Gaines, 1983, page 19

For Lennon, Rock n' Roll marked the first of many "fads" or causes that would attract him immediately for the rest of his life. Peter Brown refers to Lennon;'s penchant for adopting and assimilating new ideas without a moments thought as his desire to find "The Next Big Thing." With its cerebral and heady attributes, which mirrored perfectly his own personality, Rock n' Roll became John Lennon's First Big Thing, and it would remain his most enduring.

The intervening years between Lennon's discovery of Rock n' Roll music and the birth and meteoric rise of The Beatles have been well documented, and it was during these years, as The Beatles became not just a national but an international institution, that John Lennon found the opportunity to bring the other, former aspect of his creativity to the public forum. As The Beatles composed hit after sweet-smelling hit, and engaged in a gruelling programme of touring and public appearances, Lennon continued to quietly work away at his writings and drawings. By being the megastar that he was, Lennon had an ideal platform from which to launch his anthology of prose, poetry and illustration, *In His Own Write.* Some of the material for this collection was taken from a column he used to write for the Liverpool music periodical *Mersey Beat*, and some were jotted down on the road in hotel rooms and on tour buses.The introduction to the 1997 Pimlico edition of the two anthologies tells of the way in which the book came to be.

> It happened by chance. According to Tom Maschler, then Literary Director of Jonathan Cape, 'the idea stemmed from a book I had commissioned about The Beatles, by an

> American journalist called Michael Braun. In the middle of the book, Braun handed me several little ditties: I thought they were wonderful and asked him who wrote them. When he told me John Lennon, I was immensely excited.
> -Savage, 1997, page v

The volume was published in March 1964, and became an instant bestseller. It would be facile at this point to say that *anything* written by *any one* of The Beatles would, in the climate of the moment, have become a bestseller. However, the book's worth became apparent after the excellent notices it received in the established literary press at the time. The *Times Literary Supplement*, the bible of all literary reviews, stated that Lennon's efforts were

> "worth the attention of anyone who fears for the impoverishment of the English language and the British imagination."
> -Weiner, 1995, page 77

According to the Pimlico edition, *In His Own Write* sold nearly 200,000 copies in its first ten months. So, while the book obviously received its enormous sales because of the identity of its author, it represented a personal success for Lennon as it's unconventional Joycean language and humourous drawings quickly drew respect from those outside the Beatle fanbase, giving Lennon, for the first time, recognition of the more intellectual and dark side of his creative muse. For him, it must have been two fingers in the face of his teachers and school colleagues, having achieved artistic respect on top of international acclaim for his more conventional output of pop songs. The spontaneity of his writing echoes the spontaneity of his drawing, its immediacy, and collected coherently in the book, the two complement each other beautifully. On this matter of spontaneity, Lennon is quoted in the introduction to the new edition as saying in an interview on the radio programme *World of Books* on 24 June 1965:

> I hardly ever alter anything. Because I'm selfish about what I write or big-headed about it. Once I've written it I like it and the publisher sometimes says, you know, shall we leave this out or change that and I fight like mad because once I've done it, I like to keep it. But I always write it straight off.
> -Pimlico Edition, 1997, page vii

The first image in the book is a Lennon drawing of a character greeting the reader to the following pages (fig 12). The figure strikes a foppish pose, and seems to be a stab at the literary establishment, presenting a slightly effeminate man whose limp wrist cocks a hand in a classic "dahhhhling" manner. It had been noted that "Lennon was touchy about homosexuality....John picked a fight with a local disc jockey who had helped them get several bookings. Later he explained to Hunter Davies, his official biographer, 'I smashed him up. I broke his bloody ribs for him. I was pissed at the time. He'd called me a queer."(*Come Together: John Lennon in his time.* Jon Wiener pg 51.) (When Brian Epstein asked him to suggest a title for the manager's autobiography, Lennon replied, "Queer Jew".) This character is one of many that dot the book, with each story or poem accompanied by an appropriately bizarre illustration. Lennon's cruel humour is at its best in the poem "Good Dog Nigel."

> Arf, Arf, he goes, a merry sight,
> Our little hairy friend,
> Arf, Arf, upon the lampost bright
> Arfing round the bend.
> Nice dog! Goo boy,
> Waggie tail and beg,
> Clever Nigel, jump for joy
> **Because we're putting you to sleep at three of the clock,**
> **Nigel**.

This delightful piece is accompanied by a suitably unprecious drawing (fig 13). This poem is typical of the litany of stories of unfortunates throughout the book, and the visual versions' of the literary characters success lies in their simplicity of execution, being the visual equivalent of Lennon's approach to writing. " I change words because I haven't got a clue what words mean half the time."(Introduction to Pimlico Edition, page vii.)Lennon displays a flagrant disregard for anatomy or artistic institutions, and indeed pushes the realm of caricature to new extremes, relying on the images' and text's absurdity to get the feeling across. The irreverent manner in which the language is presented is fundamental to the images connected to it, although the two facets of the book manage to hold together when viewed in isolation. However the charm lies in Lennon's ability to throw the two together so well, and so effortlessly. The work is indulgent and sometimes difficult to get through (but not very often), and yet Lennon seems to

fig 12

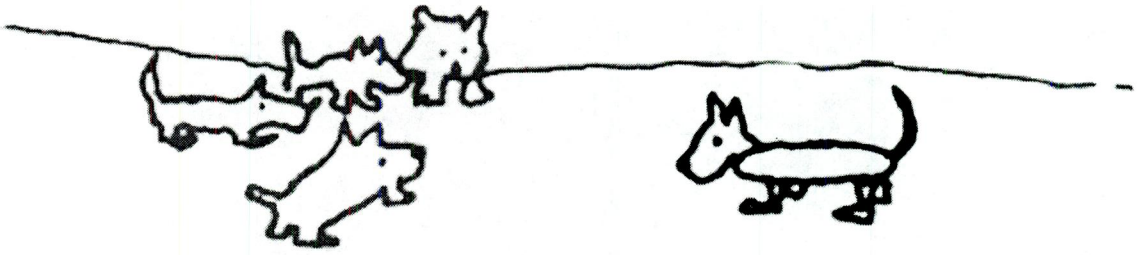


fig 13

have created a language, both visual and literary, that, while being extremely sophisticated, allows an ease of use that is comparable with literary forms observable in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and even Irvine Welsh's Scottish dialect in *Trainspotting*. Jon Wiener quotes the critic John Wain in "Come Together":

> 'The first thing any literate person will notice on reading through Mr. Lennon's book is that it all comes out of one source, namely the later work of James Joyce. Not only the determination to communicate almost exclusively in puns, but the equally determined smutty, blasphemous and subversive tone, are Joycean...Mr. Lennon has, at one stroke, put the young reader in touch with a central strand in the literary tradition of the last thirty years in every English-speaking country.'
> -Wiener, 1995, page 77

Lennon has described The Beatles lifestyle during the period of their early rise to fame as being like "Satyricon", that their lives resembled those of the decadent Romans with indulgences of every kind being heaped upon them by the fans and sycophants that followed them everywhere they went. Something of his disillusionment with this style of life, his "Fat Elvis" period, can be seen in the piece "Neville Club".

> All of a sudden I notice boils and girls sitting in hubbered lumps smoking Hernia taking Odeon and going very high. Somewhere 4ft high he had Indian Hump which he grew in his sleep. Puffing and globbering they drugged theyselves rampling or dancing with wild abdomen, stubbing in wild postumes amongst themselves.

This extract is readily "translated", but the point of Lennon's literary language is not to be "translated", but to be experienced as is, in its efforts to amuse, narrate and denigrate an already ridiculous situation. The accompanying illustration (fig 14), is as simultaneously hilarious and damning as the text. Again, as in his earlier sketchbooks, we can see Lennon commenting on characters from his life, encountered on the road, at parties, during The Beatles years-long orgy. It is during this period that Lennon would pen the song "Help". Ian Macdonald, in "Revolution In The Head", characteris-

Puffing and globbering they dragged theyselves rampling or dancing with wild abdomen, stubbing in wild postumes amongst themselves ...

fig 14

es this as

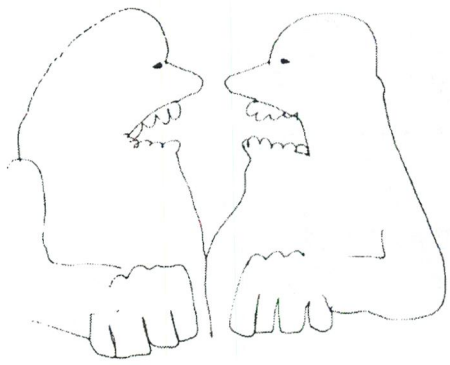
> Mentally exhausted by two years of continuous touring, he was isolated and alienated in his multi-roomed mansion in the stockbroker belt of London's western fringe. His marriage damaged by an orgiastic round of whores and groupies on the road, he felt unsustained by his faithful and attentive wife, Cynthia, who, concerned for her husband's health, made no secret of disapproving of his drug intake. all of this amounted to a personal malaise that would expand to overwhelming dimensions during the next two years.
> -MacDonald, 1995, page 120

Another important piece to note is "...The General Erection," from the second book, *A Spaniard In The Works*, published in June 1965. Here can be seen the emergence of political comment, while rather innocuous, on the part of Lennon. It is an early indicator of an attitude that would become more and more prevalent in Lennon in later life. The piece begins with the passage

> Azue orl gnome, Harrassed Wilsod won the General Erection, with a very small marjorie over the Torchies. Thus pudding the Laboring party back into powell after a large abcess. This he could not have done withoutspan the barking of thee Trade Onions, heady by Frenk Cunnings (who noun has a SAFE Seat in Nuneating thankyou and Fronk (only 62) Bowels hasn't.

Here, as in much of the written works, the satire of the piece is cemented by the absurd nature of the language. Thus, by writing of the Labour victory in his style, Lennon brings the level of satire further, and this serves, with the illustration added,(fig 15) (to further pooh-pooh the political process and situation. Rather than utilising highbrow political satire, Lennon relies on his ability with wordplay and image to make his point, without being preachy. This is a crucial element to the work in *In His Own Write* and *A Spaniard In The Works*. The writings and drawings in these volumes are imbued with Lennon's mischievous nature and come across as being both wonderfully naive in the use of language and image, and as possessing a literary and visual sophistication worthy of the high praise of the established

literary and art world. In this, they are most successful, in that the books appealed to both the ardent Beatle fan in their quirky Lennonisms, and the seeker of a deeper side to the squeaky clean Beatle image. The books are important as precursors both to the more mature, introspective lyrical slant the Beatles would adopt, and as the first presentation to the public of John Lennon as a visual artist.



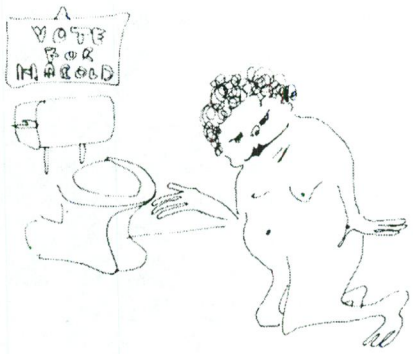


fig 15

Chapter 2

"Living Is Easy With Eyes Closed"

> Cynthia, who, concerned for her husband's health, made no secret of disapproving of his drug intake. all of this amounted to a personal malaise that would expand to overwhelming dimensions during the next two years.
> - MacDonald, 1995, page 120

If the two years after the publishing of John Lennon's books, "In His Own Write" and "A Spaniard In The Works", indicated a "personal malaise" on his part, it certainly did not signify an or musical one. It was during this period that The Beatles wrote and recorded their historic groundbreaking albums "Revolver" and "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." The major influence on the Beatles at this time was every bit as much a part of the emerging sixties counter-culture as they and their music were. According to Geoffrey Giuliano's *The Beatles: A Celebration,*

> The Beatles first encounter with marijuana was on New Year's Eve 1962 on Shaftesbury Avenue, near Trafalgar Square in London. They were in town auditioning for Decca when they met someone who had a little pot and wanted to borrow their van to toke up in. 'Forget it,' said John. 'This band has enough problems without getting mixed up in anything like that!'
> -Giuliano,1986, page 89

Only a couple of years later, however, marijuana would become a staple of the group's daily diet. Ringo Starr commented in the television series, Anthology, that they were "having joints for breakfast." The other substance that would affect profoundly their work was LSD. The story of how John Lennon and George Harrison experienced their first "trip" after being spiked by Harrison's dentist has now passed into legend. Lennon is quoted in *The Beatles: A Celebration* as saying "God it was terrifying, but it was also fantastic." (*The Beatles: A Celebration,* Giuliano, page 90) George Harrison would back him up with: "It was like I had never tasted, smelled, or heard anything before. For me it was like a flash...from that moment on I wanted to have

that depth and clarity of perception all the time." (Giuliano, 1986, page 90). At the time of Beatles' discovery of LSD, and the recording of "Revolver" and "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," the sixties were giving birth to a cultural revolution of sorts, when young people reevaluated their lives and attitudes to each other and to the world around them. The mid sixties represents a period where the youth were dispensing with capitalist "me" society, and instead were turning to a hodge-podge of sexual liberation, eastern philosophy and mind-freeing drug use for personal revolution en masse. The roots of this counter culture can be found in the beat movement of the nineteen fifties in America when authors and poets like Jack Keroac and Allen Ginsberg advocated existentialism and living for experience of living, eschewing the post-war capitalist obsession. Indeed, such luminaries as Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Timothy Leary, "The Godfather of LSD," would find their philosophies had life breathed into them by sixties attitudes and would find themselves once more at the forefront of the cultural revolution. Retrospect and analysis has given the sixties a fairly raw deal since, especially in the Reagan/Thatcher dominated nineteen eighties, and indeed, it is difficult not to ridicule aspects of the movement when reading such inanities as Allen Ginsberg's assertion that acid should be taken so "the New Wilderness of machine America" could be experienced (MacDonald, 1995, page 13). According to Ginsberg, "If there be necessary revolution in America it will come this way."(MacDonald, 1995, page 13). However, the sixties did signify a time of real revolt, as demonstrations against the war in Viet Nam and racial segregation increased in America and across the globe. It became clear that the world's youth were dissatisfied with the status quo, and were not going to conform any longer to accepted institutions. One aspect of the cultural revolution of this period was the emergence of "hippies" and "flower-power". The non-violent, passive, love-oriented nature of the hippie movement drew The Beatles as supporters and advocators. The group were in a considerable state of ego loss, as a result of their prolonged and, particularly in the case of John Lennon, frequent use of the drug LSD. The Beatles, and the hippies, rejected political activism and opted for passive, imaginative protest, as opposed to the other prominent movement at the time, The New Left's more active, antagonistic method of protest.

If the sixties were a time for personal and political revolution and unrest, so too were they a time for artistic revolution. Just as popular music and writing had undergone drastic changes in a matter of a decade, so too did the attitudes and methods of the world's emerging artists. Just as the attitudes of the period began to become more ideological, and refused to

accept things as they were, going in the face of the establishment, so too did the attitudes of artists. Movements such as pop art, and it's main protagonists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, sought to make art less precious, and more consumable by the layman. Drawing from precursors like DuChamp and the Dadaists, many artists at this time wished for art to be less intellectual and highbrow, and more user oriented. Another movement that emerged at the time was the Fluxus group. Fluxus was the brainchild of the Lithuanian-American George Maciunas, who founded the movement in 1962. Maciunas's intention was to implement a working group of artists and experimental composers whose work would be published regularly and cheaply in a series of Fluxus Editions. In this way, the artists involved with the movement had a constant public forum to show their work, thus bypassing the gallery establishment, which was an institution the artists wished to do away with. In this way, the artists operated on a more direct level with their audience, and created an atmosphere which de-intellectualised and made less precious people's perceptions of art. The group echoed Marcel DuChamp's readymades in it's desire to deconstruct the idea of the art object and the artist as a personality. In *Fluxus Etc.* (Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, 1981), one of Maciunas's Fluxus manifestoes (fig 16) incorporates dictionary definitions of the word "fluxus" in the text. Maciunas states in the manifesto that the intention of the movement is to

> Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, 'intellectual', professional and commercialised culture, purge the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, - purge the world of 'Europanism'!
> -Hendricks (ed), 1981, page 7

In effect, Maciunas was denouncing almost every other aspect and institution of the art world, past and present. Just as the youth of the sixties wanted to trash the political establishment, and eschew conformity and the status quo, so did the Fluxus movement wish to fly in the face of the art establishment, mirroring exactly the attitudes of the counterculture on the whole. Fluxus was to

> Promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art, (to) promote <u>NON ART REALITY</u> to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilletantes and professionals.
> -Hendricks (ed), 1981, page 7

Manifesto:

2. To affect, or bring to a certain state, by subjecting to, or treating with, a flux. "*Fluxed* into another world." *South.*
3. *Med.* To cause a discharge from, as in purging.

flux (flŭks), *n.* [OF., fr. L. *fluxus*, fr. *fluere*, *fluxum*, to flow. See FLUENT; cf. FLUSH, *n.* (of cards).] **1.** *Med.* **a** A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part; esp., an excessive and morbid discharge; as, the bloody *flux*, or dysentery. **b** The matter thus discharged.

Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectual", professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, — PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPANISM"!

2. Act of flowing; a continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream; a continuing succession of changes.
3. A stream; copious flow; flood; outflow.
4. The setting in of the tide toward the shore. Cf. REFLUX.
5. State of being liquid through heat; fusion. *Rare.*

PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART,
Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be ~~fully~~ grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.

7. *Chem. & Metal.* **a** Any substance or mixture used to promote fusion, esp. the fusion of metals or minerals. Common metallurgical fluxes are silica and silicates (acidic), lime and limestone (basic), and fluorite (neutral). **b** Any substance applied to surfaces to be joined by soldering or welding, just prior to or during the operation, to clean and free them from oxide, thus promoting their union, as to in

FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action.

fig 16

and, perhaps a little ambitiously, to

> "Fuse the cadres of cultural, social and political revolutionaries into united front and action."
> - Hendricks (ed), 1981, page 7

This manifesto was written by Maciunas in 1963, and it shows an important, early example of the sixties move to the destruction of the conservative. A later manifesto by Maciunas, written in 1965, sets down the inherent differences between "Art" and "Fluxus Art-Amusement" (fig 17). Here, point for point, Maciunas lays out what Fluxus must be about in order to subvert the art establishment, and to transcend it. The crux of the statement is that the art produced by Fluxus luminaries must be

> simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or institutional value.
> - Hendricks (ed), 1981, page 9

As opposed to the "Artist", who "must demonstrate the dependability of (the) audience upon him," and "demonstrate that no-one but the artist can do art," the Fluxus artist "must demonstrate the selfsuffiency of the audience" and "must demonstrate that anything can be art and anyone can do it."-*Fluxus Etc.* (Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, 1981, page 9). This socialist, left leaning attitude to art slotted in perfectly with the prevalent attitudes of the time. Apart from Maciunas himself, other artists associated with Fluxus, who had their work included in one or other of the Fluxus Editions included George Brecht, Claes Oldenburg, John Cage, Christo, Alison Knowles, Fred Liebermann, and Kate Millet. Another artist closely associated with the movement was a Japanese-American artist, singer and actress called Yoko Ono.

Ono was born in Tokyo in February 1933 to a family that was one of the most influential and wealthy in Japan at the time. She moved to New York with her family in 1952 and began to attend the fashionable and liberal Sarah Lawrence girls school. The school's lax regime suited Yoko Ono very well. In his biography of Ono, Jerry Hopkins puts it that

ART	FLUXUS ART-AMUSEMENT
To justify artist's professional, parasitic and elite status in society, he must demonstrate artist's indispensability and exclusiveness, he must demonstrate the dependability of audience upon him, he must demonstrate that no one but the artist can do art.	To establish artist's nonprofessional status in society, he must demonstrate artist's dispensability and inclusiveness, he must demonstrate the selfsufficiency of the audience, he must demonstrate that anything can be art and anyone can do it.
Therefore, art must appear to be complex, pretentious, profound, serious, intellectual, inspired, skillfull, significant, theatrical, it must appear to be valuable as commodity so as to provide the artist with an income. To raise its value (artist's income and patrons profit), art is made to appear rare, limited in quantity and therefore obtainable and accessible only to the social elite and institutions.	Therefore, art-amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or institutional value. The value of art-amusement must be lowered by making it unlimited, massproduced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all. Fluxus art-amusement is the rear-guard without any pretention or urge to participate in the competition of "one-upmanship" with the avant-garde. It strives for the monostructural and nontheatrical qualities of simple natural event, a game or a gag. It is the fusion of Spikes Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp.

fig 17

> Yoko apparently loved every bit of it. The loose class scheduling system gave her the freedom of time, and the permissive Sarah lawrence philosophy gave her the freedom of academic choice, conspiring, in effect, to give her permission to be totally free - and Yoko was free. She herself admits that most of her time at Sarah Lawrence was spent browsing in the music library or reading.
> -Hopkins, 1987, page 16

It was at Sarah lawrence that Yoko Ono cultivated her interest in experimental music, spending much time listening to the work of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Von Webern. The avant-garde modernist music appealed to Ono in its atonality and disregard for accepted musical forms and theories. Ono met a young Japanese composer, Toshi Ichiyanagi in Manhattan while she was attending Sarah Lawrence. Despite Ono's parents' reservations, the couple married in 1956, and moved in together into a small apartment in New York.

Shortly afterward, the Ono and her husband moved into a large loft apartment and began attending classes in Zen-inspired modernist composition given by John Cage. Here, Yoko met some figures who would become players in the world of Fluxus in the sixties. Here began the bones of what would become Fluxus concerts. Artists such as George Segal and Allan Kaprow took Cage's theory that any type of noise could be called music, and put on performances, one of which involved the audience jumping through structures made of wood and plastic sheets and to sit in chicken coops making further noise with rattles. Yvonne Rainer, another artist associated with these prototype Fluxus events is quoted in Jerry Hopkin's Yoko Ono biography as saying that there was "a daredevil willingness to try anything" inherent in the group's performances. The freedom of approach and lack of sobriety of these works appealed to Yoko's disregard for authority and accepted forms. Yoko began to produce work, the essence of which would become crucial to the later manifestoes of the Fluxus movement. Her first works that arose from this interest were a series of what she termed "instruction paintings." The nature of these "paintings" was such that they became part performance and part art-object. The object of the work was to involve the participant, in a distinctly Fluxus-like manner, in an artistic exercise. One of these instruction paintings, was called "Painting To Be Stepped On." (fig 18). Here, the *instructee*, as it were, is told to put a blank canvas on the

fig 18

ground and wait while people walk across it. here, the result was random and involving, and created a situation where the artist's control over the work produced was negated as soon as the canvas is laid out. This freedom can be seen as the visual and conceptual equivalent of the random noise composition of people like Cage. Here we see a similar viewpoint of what should be important about art spanning several disciplines, and being applied in each case successfully. Yoko Ono describes the influence for "Painting To Be Stepped On" as coming from her childhood:

> In 15th-century Japan, a 'stepping painting'(Fumie) was used to distinguish Christians from non-Christians. A person was asked to step on the portrait of Christ.Those who could not were immediately taken away to be crucified. Most Japanese Christians refused to step on the portrait, despite the consequences, which they were aware of. As a young child, I was terrified of that story, but I also promised myself that I would be a person who adhered to her principles just as the Japanese Christians did. Later, in New York, I felt the urge to release myself from that little girl in me and step on a painting.
> -Hendricks (ed),1990, page 58.

Here, Yoko's "painting" is operating on several levels, and this would characterise her work from here on in. On one hand, Ono is exorcising her own demons, a commonplace notion for artists. On another, the piece allows the participant to further involve other participants in his or her work. These participants do not possess the martyr-like qualities of the Japanese Christians, as they would be unknowingly taking part in the creation of the piece, however, their unwitting action puts the artist in the position of allowing a "painting" to be stepped upon. Yoko is demonstrating an ideal crucial to the understanding of her and indeed much of the Fluxus work that would follow-that of the breaking of the frame as an artistic institution, and the bringing of art-creation to the layman. Indeed, the notion of this "martyrdom" crops up in the piece "Painting To Hammer A Nail In" (fig 19).A later version of this piece, in the shape of a cross, was dedicated by Ono in 1990 "to all the martyrs in the history of the earth."(Mazzota, Milan, 1990, page 41). An important aspect of these instruction paintings was Yoko's assertion that "even refusal to participate was considered...to constitute participation."(Hopkins, 1987, page 23.) So, here is a situation where the work

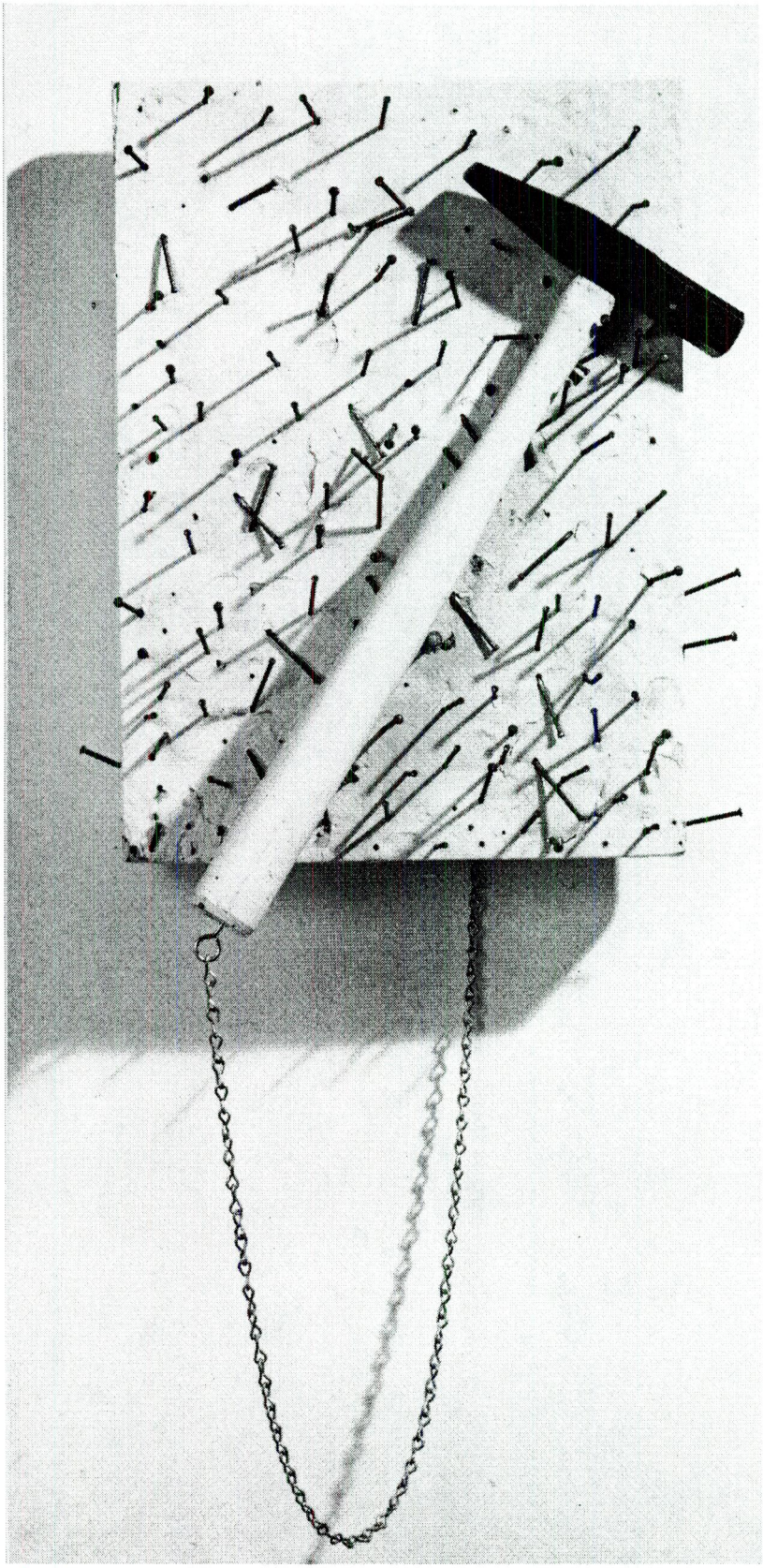


fig 19

is successful on Ono's terms when the audience or potential participant is presented with the piece. The personal decision not to be involved in the work marks a decision, a response from the instruction, which validates the piece. This canniness seems to betray something of a smug nature on the part of the artist, and leans toward the very bourgeois ideal of art that Fluxus and its subscribers abhorred. However, the notion must be commended for its self-validating characteristics, be they smug or not. In fact, much of Ono's work can be viewed from two viewpoints; it could be that Ono is in fact smugly drawing the unsuspecting public into something that is intellectually beyond them, or that she is fullfilling the important Fluxus notion "to promote NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples," even before the manifesto's inception. When viewed alongside the attitudes of her Fluxus contemporaries, I would say that Ono's intentions reside in the more innocuous and non-self-aggrandising of the two viewpoints.

Yoko Ono began to hold performances in her apartment in the winter of 1960. It was here that the roots of performance art's history were sown.

> "In fact, some art historians today say that Yoko's loft series not only provided a showcase for a wide variety of artists, but also served as a watershed for the sort of artistic activity that led to the tumbling of the last barriers in art.
> -Hopkins, 1987, page

Ono ran a six month series of events which attracted the notice of many important figures of the avant-garde world. John Cage, Max Ernst and Peggy Guggenheim all attended Yoko's loft concerts at one point or another. It was at these performances that Yoko first met George Maciunas. Maciunas arranged for Ono's first gallery exhibition, which featured her instruction paintings. The exhibition was a critical failure, but it marked the first collaboration between Fluxus' founder, and the woman whose work would epitomise the movement's ideological stance.

Ono's involvement with the embryonic Fluxus group is testament to her like-mindedness with those involved. However, Yoko's performance work, while involving the audience, tended to create a sense of unease and initial reluctance toward participation or viewing. Her 1962 piece, "Wallpiece for Orchestra", involved Ono repeatedly hitting her head against

a wall while the audience looked on. It seems, taking into account Ono's theory of non-participation being participation in itself, that she is challenging the audience to make a stand: to either allow her to continue with the self-abuse, or to intervene and put a stop to it. here, she draws on the stoicism attributed to the Japanese. A society that holds suicide as an honourable death, this piece can be seen as a reaction on the part of Yoko to Japanese thinking. The self-inflicted pain for the sake of her art is a form of communication with the audience. The performer underlines an aspect of her culture, leaving it up to the onlooker to either intervene and halt the progress of the piece, or observe as it is played out.

Another piece, entitled "Cut Piece", was performed by Yoko in Kyoto, Tokyo, London and New York. This involved the audience coming to the stage one by one and cutting parts of Yoko's clothes off with a scissors that was provided (fig 20). At the New York performance, Yoko knelt and held the scissors aloft, announcing the instructions to the bemused audience. Initial response was fairly non-existent, however, eventually a trickle of people took their place in a queue to take part in the performance. The violatory nature of the action seemed to leave the audience taken aback, and during the cutting away of her clothes Yoko displayed no emotion. Eventually her bra was cut away, signifying the end of the piece. Yoko said, rather obliquely, of the performance:

> 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 not satisfied and wanted to know what it's like in the stone.
> -Ono, 1966

Ono was literally putting herself at the mercy of her critics, and the piece possesses something of the martyr image mentioned before. At this time, Ono was receiving little or no critical notice of her work, and consequently no income. Here, a statement was being made about the artist, and the artist's audience's desire to see the object of their audience dishevelled and violated. The piece is not a feminist one, for the "score" accompanying it states that the performer can be of either sex. Yoko was engaging the audience in an exercise of direct, immediate contact with the artist and the artist's work. In this, "Cut Piece" embodies the desires of Fluxus in the fullest sense. The audience must question what it is they are inflicting on the

fig 20

defenceless woman artist who is abased before them. In this respect, "Cut Piece" represents one of Ono's more successful efforts to bring her art closer to the public.

Yoko's work began to receive positive notices in London, and it was here, at an opening of her work at the Indica Gallery that she first met John Lennon, in November 1966. The Indica had been set up by John Dunbar with money in part donated by Paul McCartney, who had immersed himself in the avant-garde world as The Beatles withdrew into the studio and shelved touring life forever. Lennon';s account of the meeting has been well documented. One of the pieces that attracted his attention at the show was "Ceiling Painting" (fig 21), which involved a canvas stuck to the ceiling, under which stood a step ladder, the ascent of which was necessary in order, with the aid of a magnifying glass, to view the content of the painting.

> I climbed the ladder, looked through the spy glass, and in tiny letters it said 'Yes'...so it was positive. I felt relieved. I was very impressed.
> -Hopkins, 1987, page 63.

Lennon also involved himself in the work at this preview show by taking a bite out of an apple that was on display as part of Ono's work.

> Both John and Yoko said later that they were drawn together immediately, recognising something of themselves in each other - a common, turned around sense of humour, a peculiar yet somewhat intellectual sense of the ridiculous side of art.
> -Hopkins, 1987, page 63.

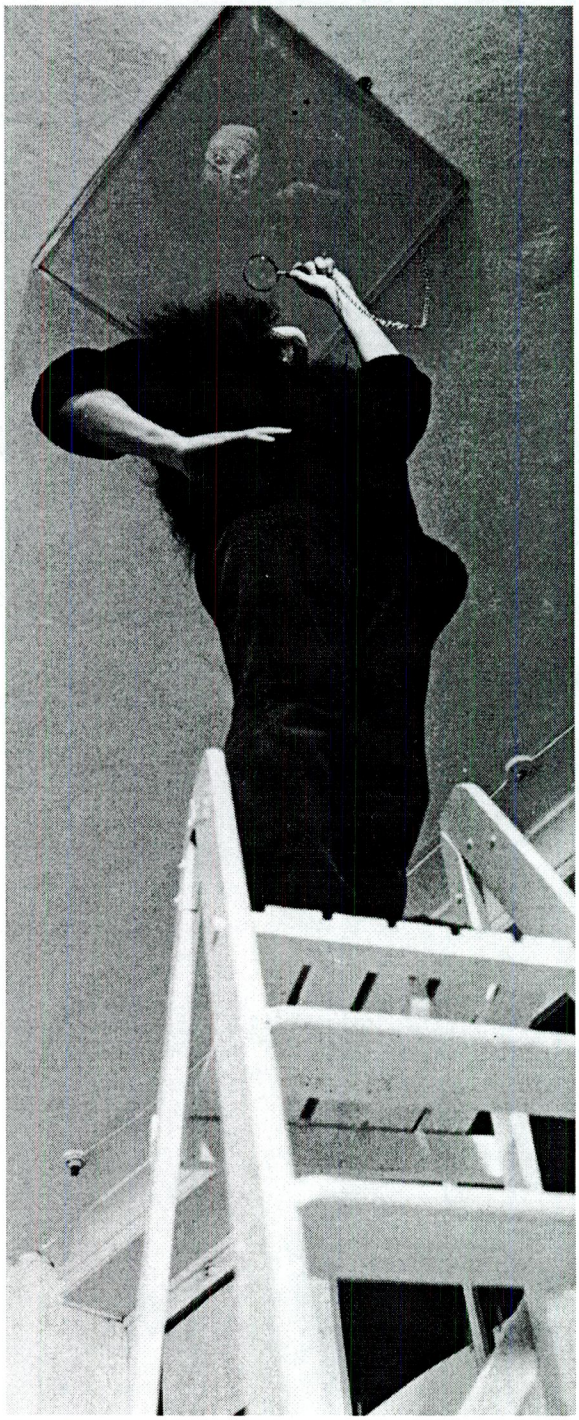


fig 21

Chapter 3

"The Ballad of John and Yoko."

"She's me in drag"
-John Lennon.

In the introduction to *John Lennon: Drawings, Performances, Films* (Herzogenrath, Hansen, Thames & Hudson, 1995), Rolling Stone writer Jann Wenner quotes Lennon from an interview in Rolling Stone after his appearance in Richard Lester's "How I Won The War."

> 'I feel I want to be them all - painter, writer, actor, singer, musician...I want to see which one turns me on and what I'll be like when I've done it.'
> -Herzogenrath, Hansen, 1995, page 18

Lennon took the part in Lester's film during the year long hiatus between The Beatles relinquishing of touring, and the recording and releasing of their epochal "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band" album. Here, Lennon returned to an alternative form of artistic expression not visited since the compilation of *In His Own Write* and *A Spaniard In The Works.* In the year after the release of the album, Lennon would consummate his relationship with Yoko Ono, and rediscover the visual and conceptual artist lurking beneath the megastar pop icon. Yoko's initial interest in Lennon stemmed from a need for funds in order to stage shows in London. Lennon financed Ono's "Half A Wind" show, consisting of everyday objects like furniture, radios, clocks, all painted white and cut in half to the tune of £5,000. Lennon was impressed by Ono's "Grapefruit" volume of her collected works, and

> called Yoko 'an original mind,'...and he felt Yoko possibly offered him an escape from the narrow box in which he felt The Beatles had kept him.
> -Hopkins, 1987, page 67.

Ono began to send instruction paintings to Lennon in an effort to seal his

interest in her and her work. According to Peter Brown's Beatles biography, *The Love You Make,* this constituted part of a relentless campaign on Yoko's part to snare the affluent Beatle. John and Yoko would have it that it was merely a meeting of like minds. In May 1968, Yoko, on Lennon's invitation, arrived at his house and the two spent the evening creating and composing what would become "Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins," their first cooperative musical release, and the first instance of a Beatle's solo album. This night and the following morning signified the beginning of their artistic and romantic union. For all intents and purposes, from that day forth, they were inseparable.

This year, 1968, represented Lennon's return to the role of a working artist. He and Yoko began to collaborate as artists, and John began to draw again. Figures 22 and 23 show two drawings, from 1968 and 1969 respectively, that show Lennon's turn toward introspection in his visual art. "Apple Pie Bed," (1969) depicts the newly wedded Lennons in just that - an apple pie bed. Figure 22, "Multiple Self Portrait," is equally to the point. Both images are rendered rapidly and succinctly, recalling Lennon's illustrations in his two anthologies of writing. The couple's first collaborative performance event was "The Acorn Event," on 15th June, 1968 (fig 24). The piece was part of the British National Sculpture Exhibition in 1968, although the couple were excluded from the exhibitions catalogue. On the grass in front of Coventry Cathedral, Lennon and Ono dug two holes, one to the east and the other to the west, and proceeded to plant an acorn in each hole. Lennon spoke of a desire for the East and West to be united in peace before covering the holes with earth. In doing this, the Lennon's were offering themselves as an example of the possibility for East to meet West and find a common ground, as it were. Another aspect to the piece was the placing of a wrought iron garden bench at the site. This introduced the notion of the public's ability. if they so desired, to sit and observe the progress of the acorns as they grew into two oak trees. This is a perfect example of the harmonious union of the two artists' ideals. The participatory nature of the bench for the audience envelopes Yoko and Fluxus' desire for layman's involvement. The notion of planting acorns for peace appealed to Lennon's, The Beatle's and the sixties hippie counterculture's search for harmony.

John Lennon opened the first public exhibition of his art at the Robert Fraser Gallery in London on 1st July, 1968. Called "You Are Here, "

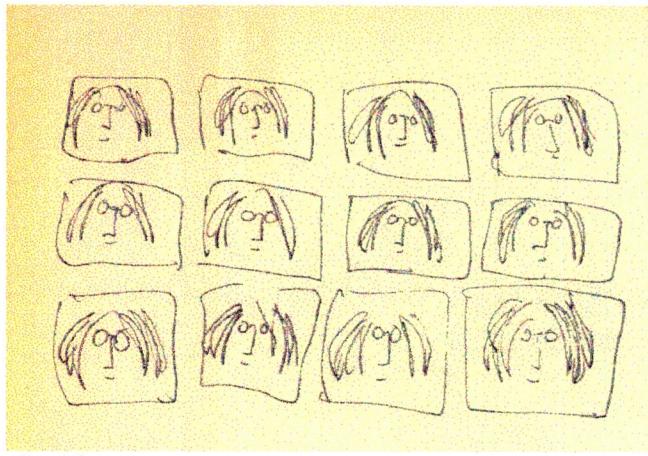


fig 22

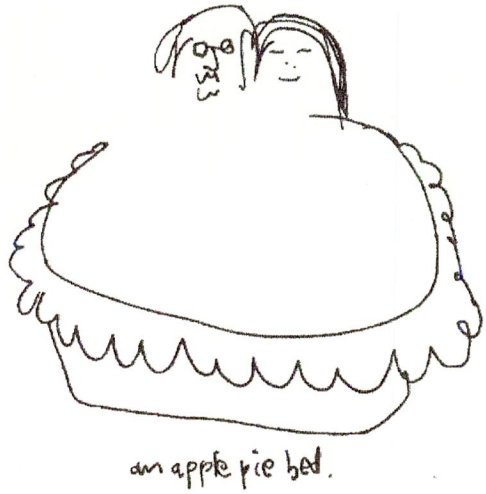


fig 23

fig 24

a title which recalls the positivity Lennon felt when viewing Ono's "Ceiling Painting" at the Indica two years before. The exhibition included a selection of kitsch charity collection boxes compiled by Lennon (fig 25). This selection can be seen from a number of different viewpoints. It has been remarked that Lennon held a fascination with cripples and unfortunates. Indeed, the evidence of this can be seen in his illustrations in *In His own Write* and *A Spaniard In The Works.* The Beatles had first hand experience with this side of society during their touring years when crippled children would be presented to them backstage at their American concerts, with the premise that the godlike Fab Four could somehow touch and cure these unfortunate "basket cases", as Ringo Starr put it in the "Anthology" television series. On the other hand, Lennon can be seen as setting the stage for his own search for charity. The inclusion of a white hat labelled "For The Artist: Thank You" (fig 26) signifies Lennon's desire to be recognised as an artist, completely removed from his unshakeable Beatle persona, whilst recalling the early days of a struggling musician. It seems Lennon is reluctant to completetely rubbish this side of his artistic output.

The next performance venture by John and Yoko was once again a statement for peace. At this stage, The Beatles were well on the way to the acrimonious split that has been oft attributed to Yoko Ono's appearance in Lennon's life. However, Lennon was eager to continue the message of tolerance and peace that underpinned The Beatles' message to the world. After their marriage in March, 1969, the Lennons conducted their honeymoon in an Amsterdam Hilton hotel room as a public demonstration / performance piece in the name of peace. Lennon had recently returned his MBE (awarded to each member of The Beatles in 1965 in recognition of their worldwide success) to the Queen as a protest against British involvement in the African nation of Biafra. The Amsterdam Bed-In was a further step in Lennon's peace efforts, aswell as constituting another collaborative performance with Yoko Ono. The press were invited and the media became the "gallery" in which this latest piece would be exhibited. The couple spent an entire week in bed, surrounded by hand-lettered posters proclaiming "Hair Peace", "Bed Peace", "Stay In Bed", "I love John," and "I Love Yoko." (figs 27 & 28). Lennon proclaimed to the press on the first day of the Bed-In

> 'Yoko and I are quite willing to be the world's clowns if by doing so it will do some good. I know I'm one of those

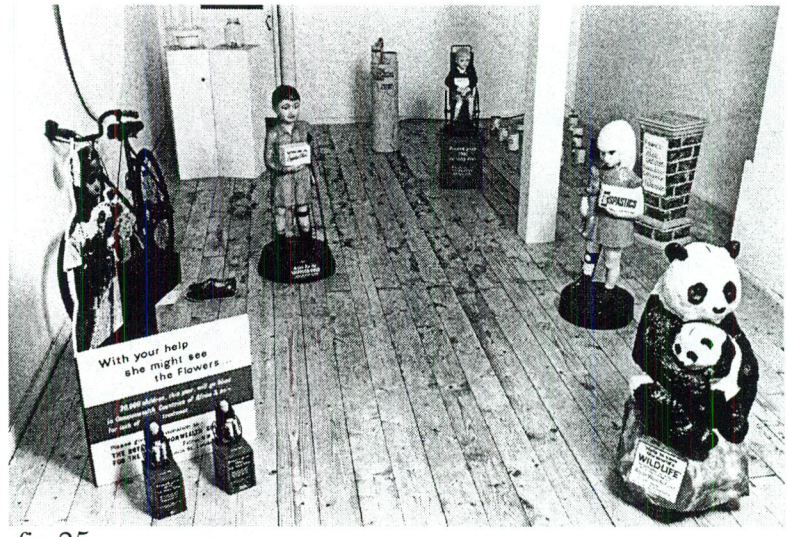


fig 25

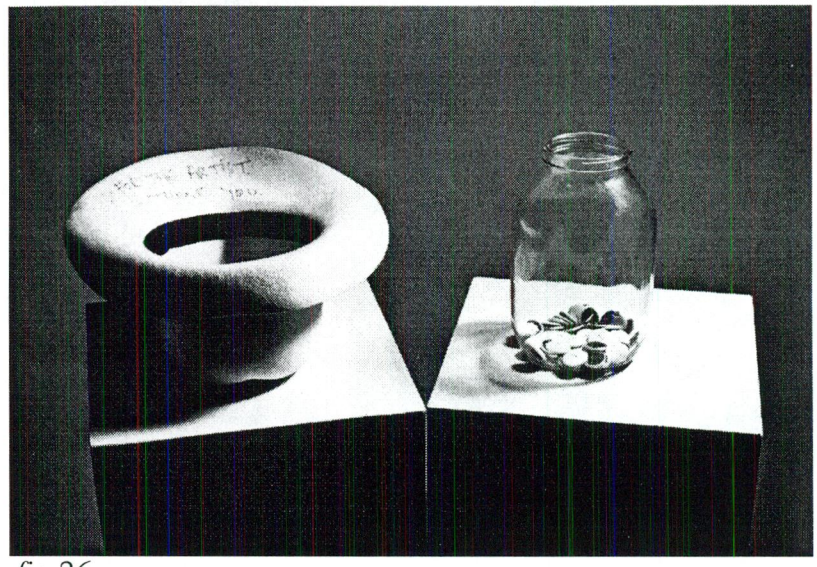


fig 26

fig 27

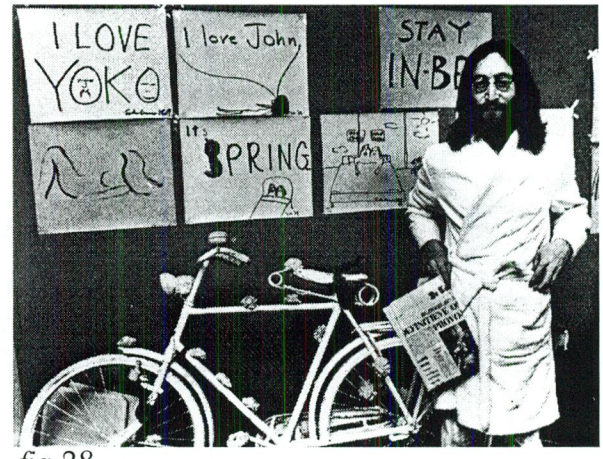


fig 28

> 'famous personalities.' For reasons only known to themselves, people do print what I say. And I'm saying peace...We're trying to make Christ's message contemporary. What would he have done if he had had advertisements, records, films, TV and newspapers? Christ made miracles to tell his message. Well, the miracle today is communications, so let's use it.'
> - Herzogenrath, Hansen, 1995, page 168

Lennon is confronting his celebrity status and utilising it in its fullest. Here, he admits that he has been controlled and portrayed by the media in whatever form they desire, and sees this as an opportunity to subvert this celebrity and use it to his own artistic ends. Lennon, still shackled by his Beatle persona, and thus ridiculed in this light, transcends this situation and turns what can be perceived as "the enemy," the media, on itself to further his own needs. The second Bed-In, in Montreal, brought the piece closer to its ultimate target, the USA. At this event, Lennon is quoted as saying

> 'The whole effect of our Bed-In has made people talk about peace. We're trying to interest young people into doing something for peace. But it must be done by non-violent means - otherwise there can only be chaos. we're saying to the young people - and they have always been the hippest ones - we're telling them to get the message across to the squares...The whole scene has become too serious and too intellectual.'
> -Herzogenrath, Hansen, 1995, page 169

In these performances / demonstrations, Lennon is encompassing his own ideals of peace and personal liberation with Yoko Ono's Fluxus-based theories of art-object destruction and audience assimilation of art. By using the media to its fullest extent, and thus abusing his notoriety as a public figure, Lennon brings together all the notions that have become dear to him. He says that this marriage of art and peaceful protest holds importance over overt action because the establishment knows

> how to play the game of violence, and it's easier for them when they can recognise you and shoot you. They don't know how to handle humour, peaceful humour, and that's

> our message, really.
> -Herzogenrath, Hansen, 1995, page 169

The Montreal Bed-In finished with the performance and recording of "Give Peace a Chance." The song , performed by Lennon, Ono, and a host of guests including Timothy Leary, a group of Hare Krisnas and a New York Rabbi, signifies the union of Lennon's musical and artistic impetus and ideology with that of Yoko Ono.

Chapter 4

"Look At Me."

> "John did his drawings with inspiration and speed, very much like how he created his songs."
> -Yoko Ono, Herzogenrath, Hansen, 1995, page 7.

During the years of his collaboration and marriage to Yoko Ono, John Lennon continued to produce large amounts of drawings and lithographs. This side of his artistic muse, neglected during The Beatles studio years where all the group's artistic efforts were concentrated on producing cohesive packages for their albums, remained nonetheless his most potent facet of his non-musical artistic output. While his performance pieces with Ono managed to bring together two ideologies to a successful end, Lennon's drawings represented his efforts to work as an artist on his own terms. While the subject matter of much of his work involves his relation ship with Yoko and her culture, (Lennon produced a large amount of drawings based on interpretations of the Japanese Dictionary in 1977), the pieces show an ability on Lennon's part to exist as an artist on his own.

> "It was obvious that there was a strong innate need for John to keep creating these works. Most of the time, the drawings reflected his mood...Along with his guitar, pen and paper seemed to have served as ideal tools to express John's complex emotions."
> -Yoko Ono, Herzogenrath, Hansen, 1995, page 7.

Lennon's drawings of this period demonstrate a confidence of approach in the treatment of the line. The fluidity so apparent in the images from *In His Own Write* and *A Spaniard In The Works* is more evident here, as if, somehow, Lennon's discovery of an outlet for this side of him has enabled to fulfil himself more readily and successfully. In his drawings, Lennon is unconcerned with representational illustration, rather he uses quick strokes and rapidly rendered forms to convey a mod or situation. Figure 29, "New York Woman," (1972)is a prime example of this simplicity and sophistication of approach.

In time, Lennon's style would become even looser, and the strokes

would become even more minimal. "Yoko with Cat," Morning Coffee," and "Sean" (figs 30, 31, 32), (1977), all show the ease which had pervaded lennon's life by this time. For a five year period between 1974 and 1979, Lennon relinquished his recording, political and artistic career in order to bring his Ono-inspired feminism to a head, in becoming a house-husband, looking after the couple's son, Sean. Here are depicted scenes of domesticity, moments from a day captured with candid snapshot spontaneity. Interestingly, the introspective self portrait, "Looking Back," (fig 33, 1977) is more laboured, as if Lennon has more of a struggle looking at himself through his work than those around him. The apparent ease with which he penned autobiographical songs like "In My Life" and "Cold Turkey" cannot be transferred to this medium. This brings to mind Yoko's assertion that "the drawings reflected his mood." Yoko also said that

> "It was as though John was using the act of drawing to balance and unite his two minds - one dark and pessimistic, and the other joyful and optimistic."
> -Yoko Ono, Herzogenrath, Hansen, 1995, page 7.

The immediacy of the drawings, the starkness of the black line, conveys Lennon's urgency in trying to translate his frame of mind at a particular moment. Here he has the ability to make a statement in literally seconds (Lennon can be seen drawing in the Imagine documentary made in 1988, and the rapidity of completion of the piece is astounding), allowing him to mark that moment much sooner than by employing the more prolonged method of song writing.

His sense of humour shines through in the pieces "Untitled" and "John Liberty", (fig 34, fig 35, 1978). Although the sense of ridiculousness is subdued, the illustrations recall other moments from Lennon's life: his status as an icon of the youth, and his victory in fighting down a deportation order from the United States government earlier in the decade. These are prime examples of the reactionary nature of Lennon's art. Simply executed, the images are those of positivity in the face of adversity.

Lennon series on the Japanese dictionary shows a desire to understand his wife's culture,and interpret an aspect of it through his unique visual language. Having embraced Yoko' feminist and artistic ideals, it was important for him to immerse himself in this other aspect of her. It repre-

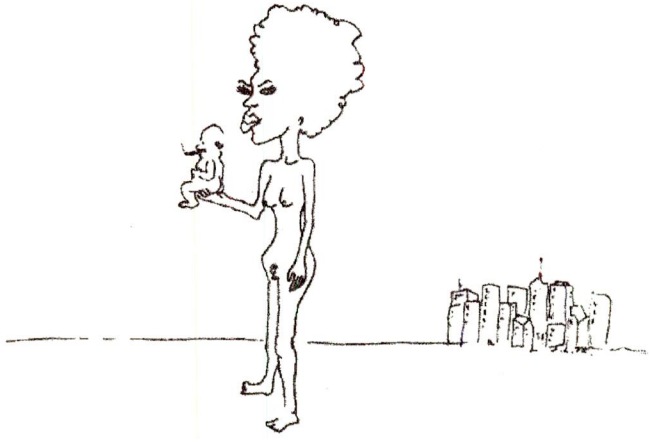


fig 29

fig 30

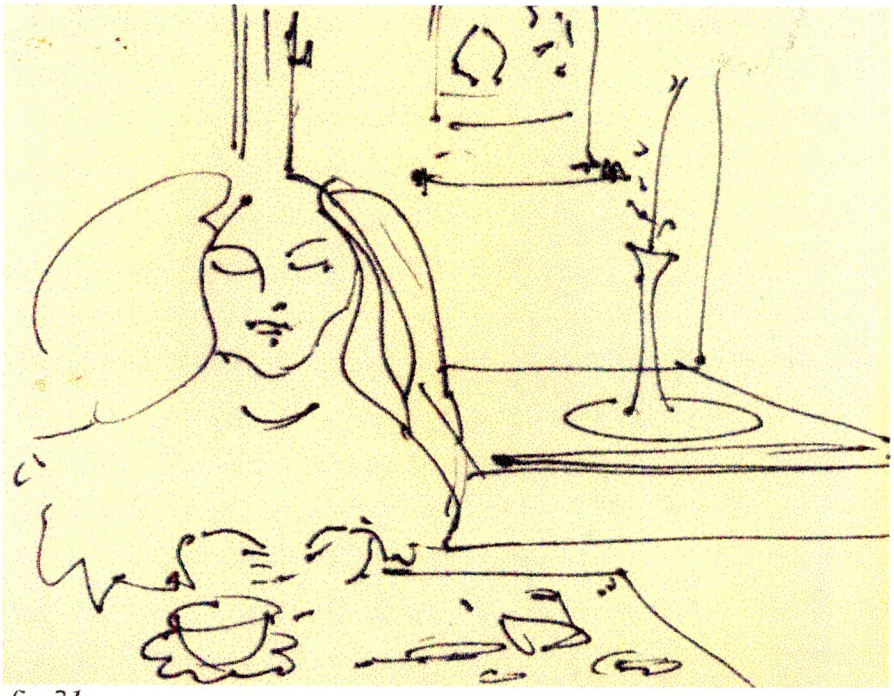


fig 31

fig 32

fig 33

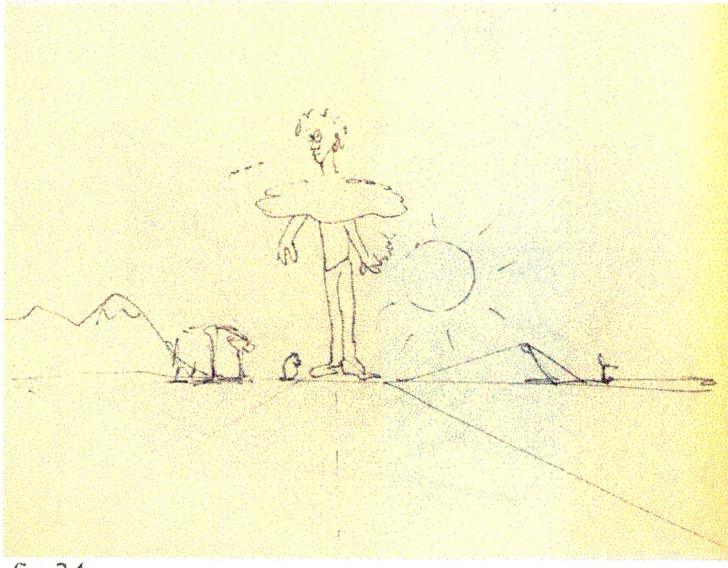


fig 34

fig 35

sents the idea of East meeting West, as referred to in "Acorn Piece" and indeed in the birth of their half-caucasian, half-Japanese son. The illustrations consist of the Japanese word in question handwritten in Roman letters, accompanied by a drawing representing the word. The images range from prosaic phrases - "Sotoni samui desu - Hijoni samui desu! It's cold outside - It's very cold outside!" (fig 36) to more complicated phrases such as "Uta o tsukuru toki, piano o tsukaimasu - When I create a song, I use a piano."(fig 37). For the most part, the visual interpretations are relatively straightforward; some others are more obscure and imbued with Lennon's eye for an absurd image (fig 38). There are sixty six drawings in total, and the series represents something of a return to the textual/visual cohesiveness of *In His Own Write* and *A Spaniard In The Works,* with Lennon now interpreting a second party's words.

This series has its roots in a previous portfolio of work that lennon produced in 1969 and 1970. The series was called "Bag One" and was to have been followed by another set called "Bag Two" which would be based on the I Ching. The second volume never came about, although the nature of "The Japanese Dictionary" leads one to believe it was the culmination of this intention. The "Bag One" series was produced on lithographic paper by Lennon and printed in London. A white carrier bag was made by French designer Ted Lapidus to hold the portfolio of prints, which received their first gallery showing at the London Arts Gallery in January 1970. The set included scenes from the couple's marriage in Gibraltar, from the Amsterdam Bed-In, and eight erotic images featuring John and Yoko. It was the nature of these prints that led to their confiscation by Scotland Yard. The images recall the cover of the couple's "Unfinished Music No. 1; Two Virgins" album (fig 39)in their exhibitionism. The pieces however hold little of the naked innocence of the album sleeve, instead depicting the couple engaging in acts of sexual intercourse. This was at the beginning of their marriage, and lennon, somewhat naively, wished to share his love of Yoko with the world. The illustrations are crudely rendered, maintaining Lennon's fluid style, but including a greater sense of detail, if not in anatomical accuracy, then in an effort to describe the two's acts of love. Figure 40 is typical of the images in "Bag One." They are frank, unembellished and unembarrassed. In their own way, by the reaction received from the public and the authorities, the lithographs succeed more in a Fluxus oriented way, rather than as a collection of illustrations. The set is relatively poor in quality in relation to Lennon's earlier and later work, however in the very act of

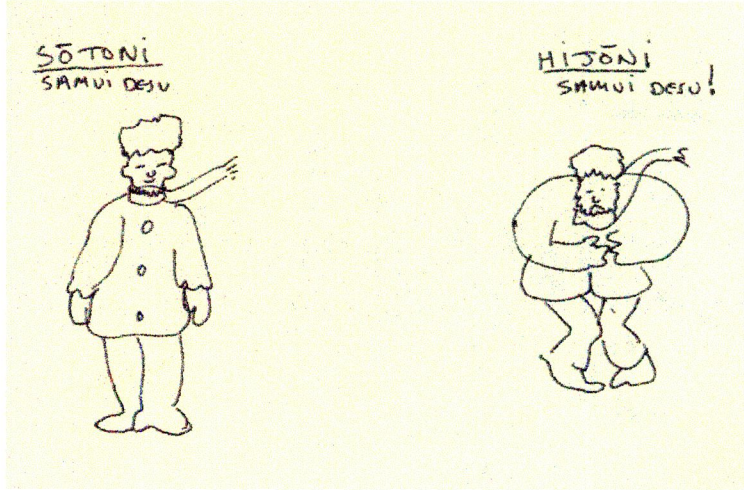


fig 36

fig 37

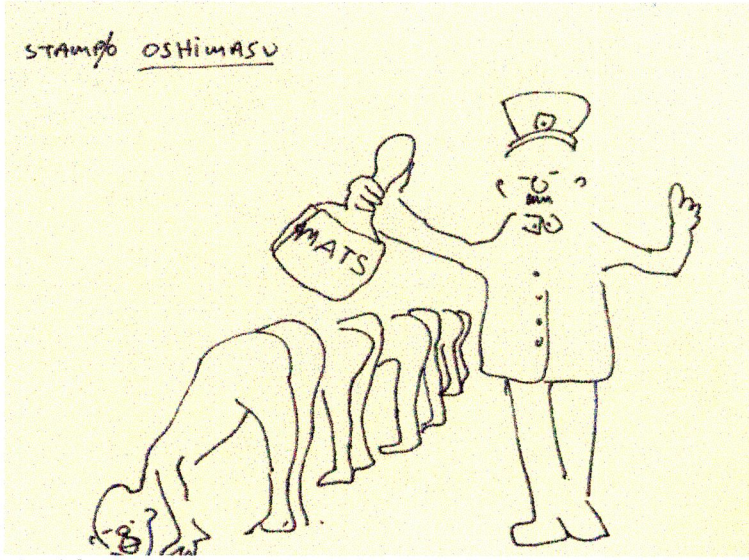
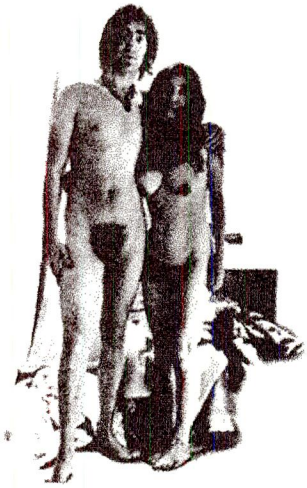


fig 38



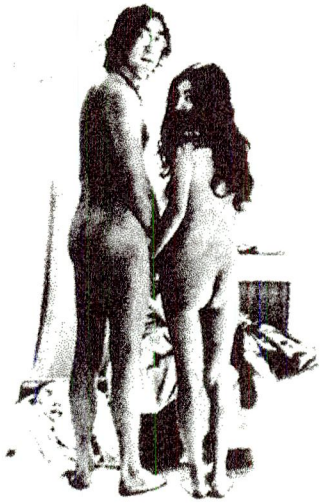


fig 39

fig 40

involving the public and the police, and thus evoking an emotional response, be it positive or negative, the series engaged it's audience, some of whom having never even seen it. The portfolio became an exercise in

> "revealing the prudery of society in dealing with love and sexuality."
> -Herzogenrath, Hansen, 1995, page 139.

This notion was one that Yoko Ono had addressed in her 1962 "Bag Piece" performance with her then partner Tony Cox, whereby the couple entered a bag, undressed and then donned their clothes again, leaving the audience to interpret what was going on inside. Lennon and Yoko would use this motif in their "Bagism" series and the notion also underpinned the Bed-Ins with the invited media expecting to witness the two having sex in bed.

In stark contrast to Lennon's fresh and spontaneous visual output in this period is the collaborative experimental film work he and Yoko produced between 1968 and 1972. This facet of performance was familiar to Yoko, who had previously scored many performance videos before her meeting John Lennon. Up until now, Lennon's experience of film was rather conventional, starring in the Beatles films *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* and taking a lead role in how *I Won The War.* His memorable appearances in the less prosaic McCartney-driven *Magical Mystery Tour,* while representing a brief foray into art- film making, can still be seen as a rather normal role. If Lennon's drawings were rapid snapshots of moments and situations, his film work with Yoko was an exercise in slowing time down, in prolonging the moment, through the protracted medium of film.

One of the first of these projects was *Film No.5 - Smile,* (1968) (fig 41). In numbering the film 5, Yoko was stating that it was the continuation of her previous pre-Lennon work. The piece consists of a portrait of John Lennon going from a straight expression to a smile. It is shot with a high-speed camera, and when played back at normal speed, the result is a fifty-one minute slow motion smile. This method would be used again in *Self Portrait,* the subject matter this time being Lennon's flaccid, then erect penis. These pieces say much about the struggle for happiness and affirmation on the part of the artists. In this, they are self-indulgent, relinquishing the desire to engage the audience, and instead opting for a painfully prolonged climax. Far more engaging is the piece *Rape* (1969) (fig 42), in which an allegedly unsuspect-

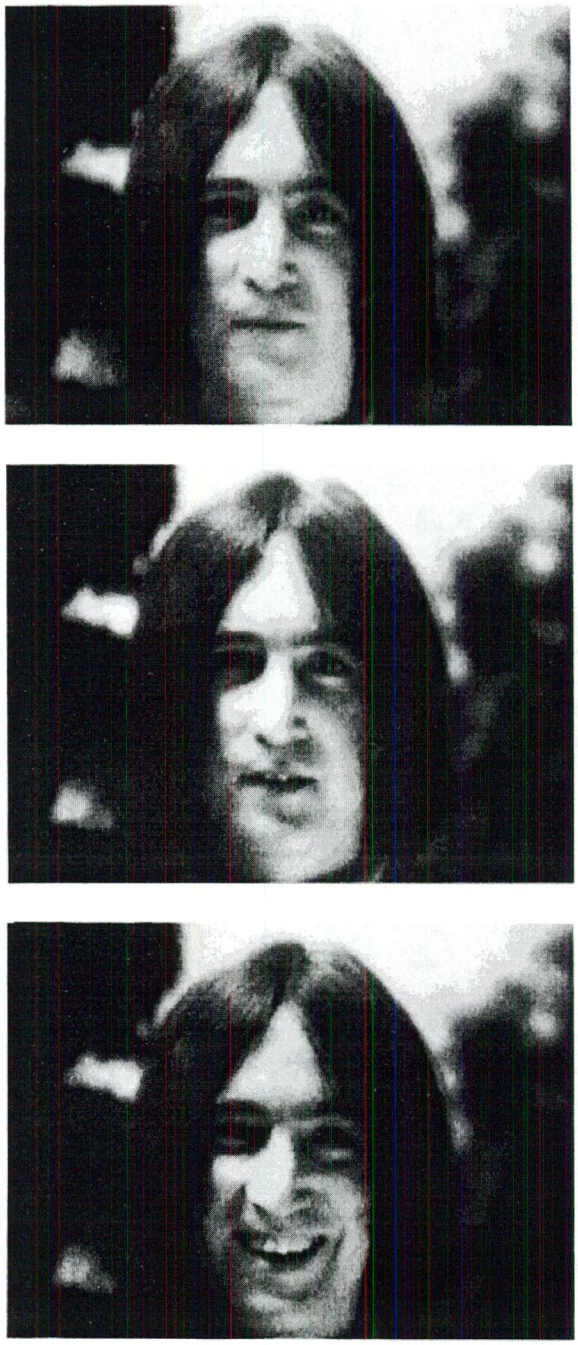


fig 41

fig 42

ing young woman is harrassed by the camera, following her around London for several days. The final edit weighs in at seventy six minutes.Again, Ono and lennon are addressing the constant abuse they were suffering at the hands of the media and general public at this time. However, the violatory nature is reminiscent of Yoko's *Cut Piece* performance, this time leaving the audience helpless to intervene in the plight of the subject. The success of thetransferal of Yoko's artistic attitudes and the merging of them with Lennon's to the medium is debatable. The very notion of film is a voyeuristic one, indeed in keeping with much of the couple's output, however, film is never *that* engaging as the viewer is essentially powerless and constricted by the linear nature of the pieces.

Conclusion

> My role in society , or any artist's or poet's role, is to try and express what we all feel. Not to tell people how to feel. Not as a preacher, not as a leader, but as a reflection of us all.
> -John Lennon.

That John Lennon maintained his resolve to produce art in his post-Beatles life, in the face of almost continuous ridicule both from the tabloid press, and the art establishment, stands testament to his commitment to furthering the means with which to express himself. Lennon found himself in a nasty position in that the mainstream media looked on his efforts as the mad dabblings of a megastar at a loose end, or worse a man under the nefarious influence of Yoko Ono. The public's dislike for Ono was no secret, and as she had received little recognition from the art world, there was no comfort to be found in this aspect of Lennon's allegiance with her. For the record buying masses, she was the "ugly", evil, *Japanese* woman who was responsible for the breakup of the world's favourite band. The very nature of Lennon's stardom. and the very public way in which he and Yoko produced some of their work, led the art establishment to dismiss him as an artist, looking on him as a bored superstar with delusions of high art. Wulf Herzogonrath puts it that

> the art world completely missed the inherently artistic aspects of events and performances that dealt directly with the permanent reality of the media and of a life spent facing the media.
> -Herzoganrath, Hansen, page 13.

The positive critical notice Lennon received for his two books *In His Own Write* and *A Spaniard In The Works* came at a time when The Beatles were media darlings. The general media and the public ignored the possibility that the work might hint at another valid aspect of Lennon's artistic ouvre, and simply embraced the illustrations and writings in the fervour of Beatlemania that swept through Britain and America. When the glory of The Beatles was over, it was unacceptable for Lennon to maintain his artistic output, and indeed much of his solo music work was universally panned by music critics.

It could be said that to certain extent, there was some justification for the lack of acceptance for Lennon as a bona-fide artist. The Yoko Ono-driven video work is at times directionless and self-indulgent. The sense that Lennon was floundering during much of his post- Beatles years can be felt in the inconsistency of his music, and his habit of flitting from one "hobby" to another. Lennon's adoption and subsequent abandonment of one political cause after another during the seventies can be seen to mirror his efforts to grasp the notion of Yoko Ono's art, and it is when their two ideologies don't appear to meet, that the work is least successful. In fact, the couple ceased to produce experimental films and stage events and performances by 1972. They continued to work together as recording artists, and Lennon produced the artwork for all of his solo albums himself, but Lennon's efforts to fight an ensuing battle against deportation from the United States while becoming more and more involved with the New Left political movement seem to have superceded his need to produce the type of work he had between 1968 and 1972.

In this respect, it is apparent that John Lennon's art was at its pinnacle when he was making work that took no effort to organise, and did not rely on the media to work. His drawings from the Bag One series, the Japanese Dictionary, and other work of this nature show a true artistic strength, an ability to comment astutely on the world and his own life in a matter of seconds. Although Yoko Ono sees the drawings as the visual equivalent of Lennon's songs, (and they are, to an extent), even in the protracted process of song composition and recording something of the initial spontaneity of observation is lost.

That Lennon was misunderstood in much of his artistic endeavours is patently obvious. His apparent stigmatisation by association with Yoko Ono did nothing but further this climate of unacceptance in his time. For the first ten years of his artistic life, Lennon had a constant partner in Paul McCartney with whom he produced a couple of hundred top quality statements through a musical medium. In his partnership with Yoko Ono, Lennon never seemed to reach the same level of assertiveness through his artistic work that he did when producing music with The Beatles. As such, while his solo musical efforts paled in comparison to those achieved in his years with the group, his solo art efforts maintained and capitalised on the quality of his earlier output in his two anthologies in the mid-sixties. While

events such as the Bed-Ins and the worldwide billboard "War Is Over" posters (fig 43) epitomised Lennon's idealism and quest for utopian society, they assumed a certain air of preachiness completely missing from his visual and musical art. The Fluxus ideal of the socialisation of art seems perversely more apparent in Lennon's illustration than in his collaborative performance and film efforts with Yoko Ono. The lack of preciousness and the candid humour of his illustrations make them pieces that are readily identifiable with and easily consumed. The very notion of the Bag One series being placed in a white carrier bag creates the double edged phenomenon of making an art object and simultaneously demolishing the highbrow import of that object by its being a mundane piece of everyday ephemera. This DuChamp-like disregard for accepted institution is what makes Lennon's illustrations so enjoyable in their freshness.

It seems a shame that it is only now that John Lennon's artistic output is finally being appreciated in its own right for what it is. Now, this body of work can be analysed without the overhanging reality of Lennon's stardom and musical career which so overshadowed and pushed into obscurity his efforts to create valid art. While her collaborations with her husband can be questioned as to their level of success, it must be noted that the most profound influence that Yoko Ono had on John Lennon was that she, by simply being his partner, created an atmosphere of prolific artistic creativity, allowing him to be comfortable with the notion of John Lennon The Artist as opposed to John Lennon The Rock Star. Yoko encouraged Lennon to draw, never to throw anything away, and never be ashamed of what the results were. This lended itself to Lennon's tendency for brutal candidness, creating a situation where he could produce this art for himself without the need for exhibition or public approval. John Lennon was an observer and a commentator in his life as a musician and songwriter and as an artist. He was always a reactive artist, and this eagerness to change the status quo, to react against what was wrong with society, to look at what was wrong with his own life amounts to an honesty that shines through in his best work.

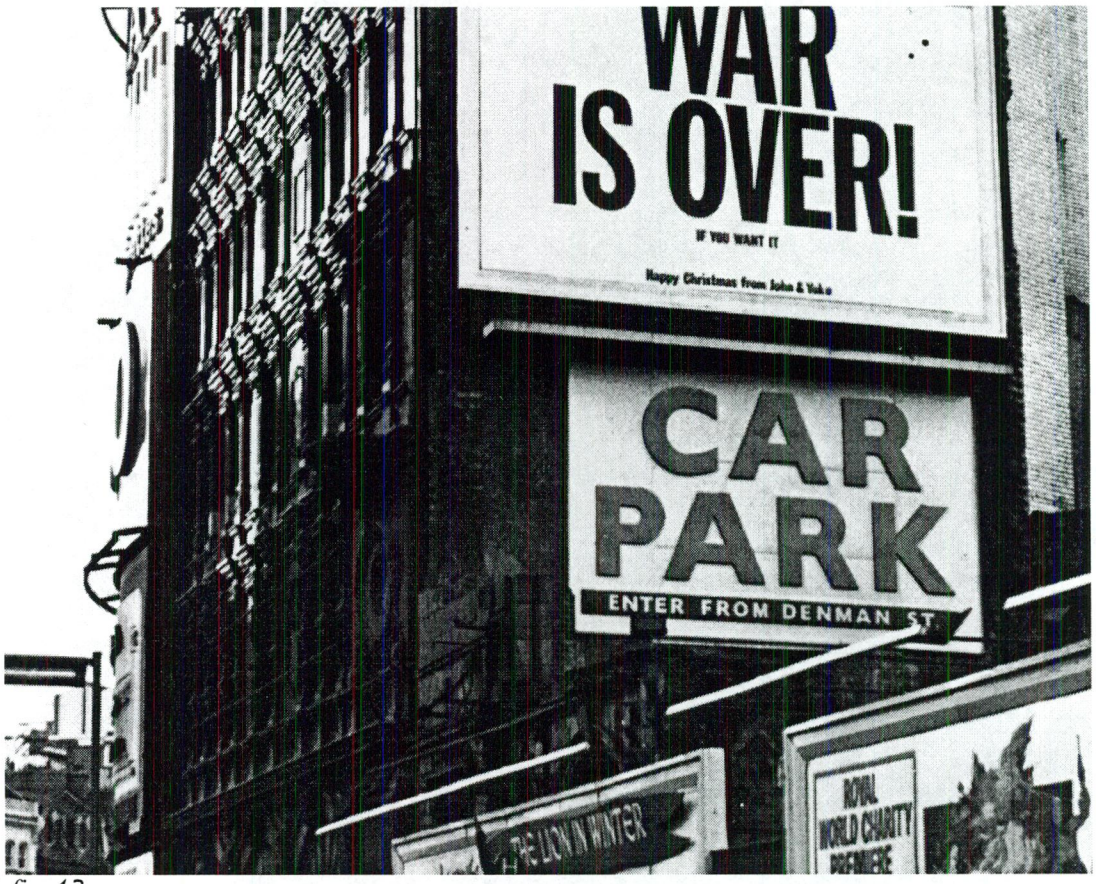

WAR
IS OVER!
IF YOU WANT IT
Happy Christmas from John & Yoko
CAR
PARK
ENTER FROM DENMAN ST.
THE LION IN WINTER
ROYAL
WORLD CHARITY
PREMIERE

fig 43

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