IN CONVERSATION: RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA AND YOKO ONO

By Yoko Ono, Rirkrit Tiravanija

John Lennon and Yoko Ono, *Montreal Bed-In*, 1969. Performance view, Queen Elizabeth Hotel, room 1742, Montreal, 1969. Photo: Jacques Bourdon.

Among the most poignant artworks made by Yoko Ono during her fifty-

Cover: **Seth Price, *Stencil*, 2008,** enamel on Dibond, two parts, overall 70 x 41".

SUMMER 2009

VOL. 47, NO. 10

ARCHIVE

year career must be White Chess Set*, 1966, in which all the pieces are white: As any game progresses, players will eventually find their sides impossible to tell apart. "Ideally," Ono says, "this leads to a shared understanding of their mutual concerns and a new relationship based on empathy rather than opposition. Peace is then attained on a small scale." So many of the artist's works revolve around such reorientations and inversions of audience expectations. And yet it is likely her generosity with viewers—in asking them to take an active role in terms of her work's interpretation and also its realization—that has made her increasingly compelling for artists working today. On the occasion of the artist's being awarded the Golden Lion at this year's Venice Biennale—and on the fortieth anniversary of her* Bed-In *performance with John Lennon, currently the subject of an exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art—*Artforum *invited Ono to discuss her work with Rirkrit Tiravanjia, whose practice shares much with hers. Indeed, Tiravanija's presence will also be felt in Venice, since the Biennale's Palazzo delle Esposizioni will feature an informal meeting space and bookstore designed by the artist. Ono spoke with Tiravanija by phone from her New York residence one evening last month—or one morning, from Tiravanija's perspective in Thailand—about work both past and present, as well as about possible futures.*

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RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA: Hello, Yoko?

YOKO ONO: I'm here. You sound really distant; why is that? Is it your phone, or . . . ?

RT: Well, I am in Thailand. [*laughter*]

YO: Oh, of course, that's right. So we'll have to sort of stretch our ears. It's

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very interesting, doing it like this, you know. But please go ahead. You wanted to ask me some questions?

RT: Well, something noteworthy to me is that it's the fortieth anniversary of the *Bed-In*, and maybe we should talk about that. Many people have heard a little bit about that moment already, I think, but maybe you could say more.

YO: I do feel that it was a very interesting performance-art work, in the sense that it has stayed in people's minds for such a long time.

RT: That was something I found myself quite interested in, actually, because *Bed-In* seems like something that happened in an almost completely natural way.

YO: Yes, it did begin as a rather natural thing to do. At least, you know, we were in bed. It wasn't like standing around every night for four or five hours. It was very comfortable.

RT: But you had started it in Amsterdam, and then you went to Montreal, where you continued it, right?

YO: Montreal is a very, very beautiful, beautiful city. And we enjoyed that.

RT: And that was also when you recorded the song . . .

YO: Pardon?

RT: That's also when you recorded the song.

YO: Yes, yes.

RT: And was the song just written in the bed?

YO: About what, the bed? This what?

RT: You wrote the song in the bed?

YO: [*pause*] You know, maybe you need to talk a little farther from the microphone or receiver.

RT: I just kind of continued on the question about the bed.

YO: Or maybe say it slowly.

RT: It's about how you came to write the song that was set in the bed, right? [*laughter*]

YO: I think this is very interesting, the kind of challenge that we have been given. You're an artist, and I'm an artist. And somehow we were given this incredibly strange situation where we have to communicate over a very, very long distance, which means a huge amount of air is between us.

RT: [*laughs*] Well, thinking of distance, when I was a younger artist, I was invited to be in a Fluxus event in Buffalo, New York, and I was very much interested in the scores that you had written. And the piece that I made as part of this exhibition was . . . Can you hear me OK?

YO: I can. You were invited to Buffalo, New York. But you say, "When I was young . . . " From my end, it looks as though you are very young.

RT: Well, back then, one of the pieces I did was to give the audience different scores you had written—instructional scores, for people to actually perform themselves as part of the exhibition.

YO: But isn't that what we always do? I mean, children are always doing something—you know, changing their goals.

RT: That's true.

YO: But I thought it would be interesting to create instructions because I have a background in music—and in music, we have scores. And anyone can play them. And they can play much later after the work is made. I like that.

RT: And, of course, you like the idea that people can create their own

relationships to the score through interpretation.

YO: The scores make the work available to everybody and for the longest time. And that makes them free from my control.

RT: What's most important about the ways in which you involve the audience? Letting people take a work and continue it on their own?

YO: Again, it's very much like music. Even when scores are professional, the people playing have to find their own ideas for the work. And then, of course, some other people will say, "Well, that's not loud enough," or "That's too loud," or whatever. You know, that's the point at which it becomes very interesting.

RT: How does that thought relate to your earlier performances like *Cut Piece* [1964], where people joined you on the stage, coming very close to you and cutting off your clothes?

YO: Well, you know, I have a performer in me; I don't want to suppress that either. And I believe in communicating in whatever way is suited best for what I want to communicate. Sometimes it is music; sometimes it is painting, or something else. Usually, though, it's a combination of things. In trying to communicate as much as you can, you use everything, right? You use performance, you use words, you use instructions.

RT: I was recently reading an old interview, actually, where you talk a bit about the idea of Buddhism. And I began to wonder about how much of these impulses come from your background with that. What is the nature of what you are giving away in these different instances—when you give people, in some kind of interpretive way, a piece of yourself, or when you give them a chance to interpret your work and to be involved with it?

YO: Well, when I first began as an artist, I would compose haikus, expressing things in lines of seven-five-seven syllables. And I really loved doing that. But then there came a point where I wanted to communicate something stronger than the haiku. Well, actually, you can't communicate "stronger" than the haiku can, but you can elaborate an idea so that people better understand it. So you can see, in my work, a moment where it was getting more desperate for me to communicate—in the sense that I was trying to communicate in a way that was more understandable. Some artists will try over time to communicate in more and more complex

forms, you see. But in my case, I started very complex and then wanted to communicate in a simpler way, so that we would really reach each other. Does that make sense to you? Yes, of course, it does make sense to you, right?

RT: I guess all your different form of communication are, for me, efforts to touch people in different ways. I mean, I was in a work with you in Munich, where you did *ONOCHORD* [2004], which is very simple and direct, with people turning on a small light for each word . . .

YO: In *ONOCHORD*, I'm hoping that I can communicate on a simple level, like "I love you." Each person is given light to flash, which builds the meaning. There's no way to misunderstand it. Just like there's no way to misunderstand the *IMAGINE PEACE TOWER* [2007] in Iceland. Sometimes it's dangerous to communicate in words. Words can have many, many meanings. You have to be very, very specific. Words are incredibly beautiful and powerful entities for creating reality. But we should use them wisely.

RT: Maybe you want to talk a little bit about the idea of misunderstanding.

YO: In the end, what communicates most is a very simple message.

RT: You once said that the word *yes* is your favorite word. Is it still?

YO: Well, I don't know. At the time I said that, though, I did want to say *yes* instead of *no*.

RT: Right.

YO: You see, it is almost as if that message was given to me, rather than me giving that message. It came to mind when I was wanting to create a piece using a huge, huge, tall, tall, tall ladder—so you would have to keep climbing up the ladder, possibly in a church, where there is a very high ceiling. And you would keep climbing this ladder, and finally, when you were almost at the top, you would look at the ceiling, and it says YES to you. It was like my own version of a biblical message of life.

RT: So it's like getting a voice from heaven. [*long pause*] Hello?

YO: Hello.

RT: Yoko, can you hear me?

YO: You see, the word was part of a specific work—and "Yes" was not, at that time at least, a concept that was anticipated of sculpture or performance or performance art. Of course, I don't know what we should call this work, since it's not any of these things, really. There is a combination, with the ladder, and the height, the ceiling—like in life.

RT: Do you feel that when people are participating in such a work—say, climbing up the ladder—they become more self-aware and could perhaps even reach some other level of consciousness?

YO: Many people have gotten a positive message from this particular work, particularly because it said YES—but this is something almost beyond me. I don't even think of it as something I created. Just think of how the piece has gone through a process: It changed from the work—which was to go up and see that it says YES on the ceiling of the church—to just "Yes." Now people are thinking of the work as "Yes," without knowing the original work. And I really think that's something that was meant to be.

RT: I'm thinking again about the interview where you tell a story that involves Buddha giving away his children, his belongings—and finally himself, to a tiger, who is then enlightened; and you then say that this is a form of total giving. As opposed to, say, some reasonable kind of giving that means something like "Logically, you deserve this."

YO: Well, all my works are based on the idea of "giving," in the sense that I give up my control of the work. It becomes a total giving, rather than conditional—since it's very possible that you ask for a circle in your instructions and you get a square!

RT: So how do you feel about your words' relationship to action?

YO: Well, think about it as if I am a foreigner who comes to a country of this planet, and I am desperate to communicate with the people here. What should I do? I use my language. I use pantomime, creating some situation I hope will make people understand me. Artists, as I was saying before, are people who are trying to communicate their ideas almost

desperately. And when you are desperate, you use everything you can.

RT: Do you feel like you've succeeded in communicating with people, or do you feel like you're still trying?

YO: I am always missing the feeling of having a complete communication. I think of the complexity of my situation, which has to do with being an Asian in a society where Asians are a minority—and so I'm communicating, and yet I know that there's also a certain gap. And yet then I go back to Asia, and there too, I feel a certain gap, since for people there I represent the West. When I was young, I felt that gap all the time—with my parents, and within the environment I was brought up in. The feeling remains.

RT: I understand exactly what you're saying.

YO: Oh, I'm sure you do. You see it's one thing to be a foreigner someplace, and another to be a foreigner in your homeland as well—to be a stranger in the environment where you were a child. There have also been so many incredible changes in my life, and there's no way I can explain that to anybody.

RT: What are people's perceptions of you in Japan, and of your relationship to the country?

YO: I go back there only once a year, to do a charity show for schools in Africa. Beyond that, I'm not an observer; I'm a creator. And if I observed what is happening to the work I do, that would probably complicate my life. When we make something—or when we try to communicate—we never know how it will be received. We never know what a piece will do.

RT: So when you make any work, you don't anticipate how things will turn out. You just let it be.

YO: Let's go back to the *Bed-In*. When we were thinking about that, it was so exciting. We knew we were about to do something fantastic, and when we did it, it was something exciting too. But we didn't know it was going to be received with cynicism or with people laughing at us. I mean, it was all right that they were laughing, but there was obviously some incredible miscommunication. And so I thought that was over when it ended. I certainly did not know, for instance, that you would remember what we

did or that the world would remember what we did. It's amazing. But it's just not in the calculation.

RT: There's a quote in which John said you and he were willing to be the world's clowns.

YO: We said that we would be, but it happened before we decided that we were.

RT: I was curious, though, did you ever think about the *Bed-In* as a kind of score?

YO: No, I never thought that. But it's getting to be like that, isn't it? I mean, I understand that some people want to do it.

RT: I think there's a website where a lot of people are organizing themselves to do the *Bed-In* on the anniversary—or maybe they already did it by now.

YO: Well, I think that the score was what we did. And in this case it was much better than written instructions. There are some things that you have to just do, and that will be the score. And that's how it is; and, in fact, there are many things that parents do. They try to tell their children, "Now, this is how . . ." But if they are doing it themselves, that is what becomes the score.

RT: And this also suggests something about the idea of utopia, or the example of Nutopia. Maybe could you speak a little about that. What is Nutopia?

YO: Well, I think it is the idea of all of us. It's a country that all of us exist in, a country called Nutopia in which all of us are together. That's of course very difficult to physically realize, so it is a conceptual country. But to say that it exists on a conceptual level is to say that the country exists in all of our minds, and in our hearts, and that's very important to understand. Because first there's an idea, and then we imagine that idea as a reality. Through the imagination, things do become reality—a physical reality. So it's not just a belief, but it's a recipe for creating reality. It's a recipe that works. If you try to create something only by physically enacting it, on the other hand, I can tell you that you'll be hurt. But this way—if you start with a concept, a visualization, and then create reality—

there's no hurt, no struggle, no bothers. And I know that we are probably, now, most of us in the world—well, I think that idea is in all of us.

RT: I know that you have said, "We are all imagining the same thing in the end, but we have different ideas of how to get there." I hope that we'll get the chance to actually meet in Italy when you receive your Golden Lion in Venice, where there won't be all this air and wind.

YO: I will look forward to that. But you know, when there's something *really* good—when we do something really good—there's always an interruption. You know that, don't you? So the thing is, you know, that it's a very important thing that you and I are talking, or have spoken, and that makes the wind the least of things. ▪

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