

Jonathan Cate on Yoko Ono's poetic practice

Still in the shadows

Art on the esplanade

An appreciation of Tom Devonshire Jones

Books reviewed

ACE intern required

Study day on Velázquez

As this issue is 'put to bed' ACE will be in the north west of England staging a regional event with a national remit. To mark the winners of the ACE Awards, an educational strategy has been added to the rewards given in the form of prize-money and the loan of specially commissioned artworks (by ACE) from the V&A Museum. In August this summer, as part of a day of celebration and thanksgiving for the painting by Alison Watt at Old St Paul's, David Jasper gave an inspiring paper on themes of figuration and abstraction in religious art. ACE hopes to disseminate this in a publication next year (see also Richard McLaren's report pp.5-6). And, to mark the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King's bold revival of its exterior environment at one end of Hope Street in Liverpool, a day's seminar of presentations concerning the context of religious art and architecture - that is, how it can serve its community and bring together people of different cultures and creeds - will take place at both Liverpool cathedrals on 28 September. These events, together with a third seminar due to happen in Birmingham in February 2007, have been supported by the Home Office's Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund: a long title for a cause which will, hopefully, be long-lived on the government's agenda.

Of particular significance for ACE is the impetus that these events give us to develop relationships and networks outside London. Since our famously

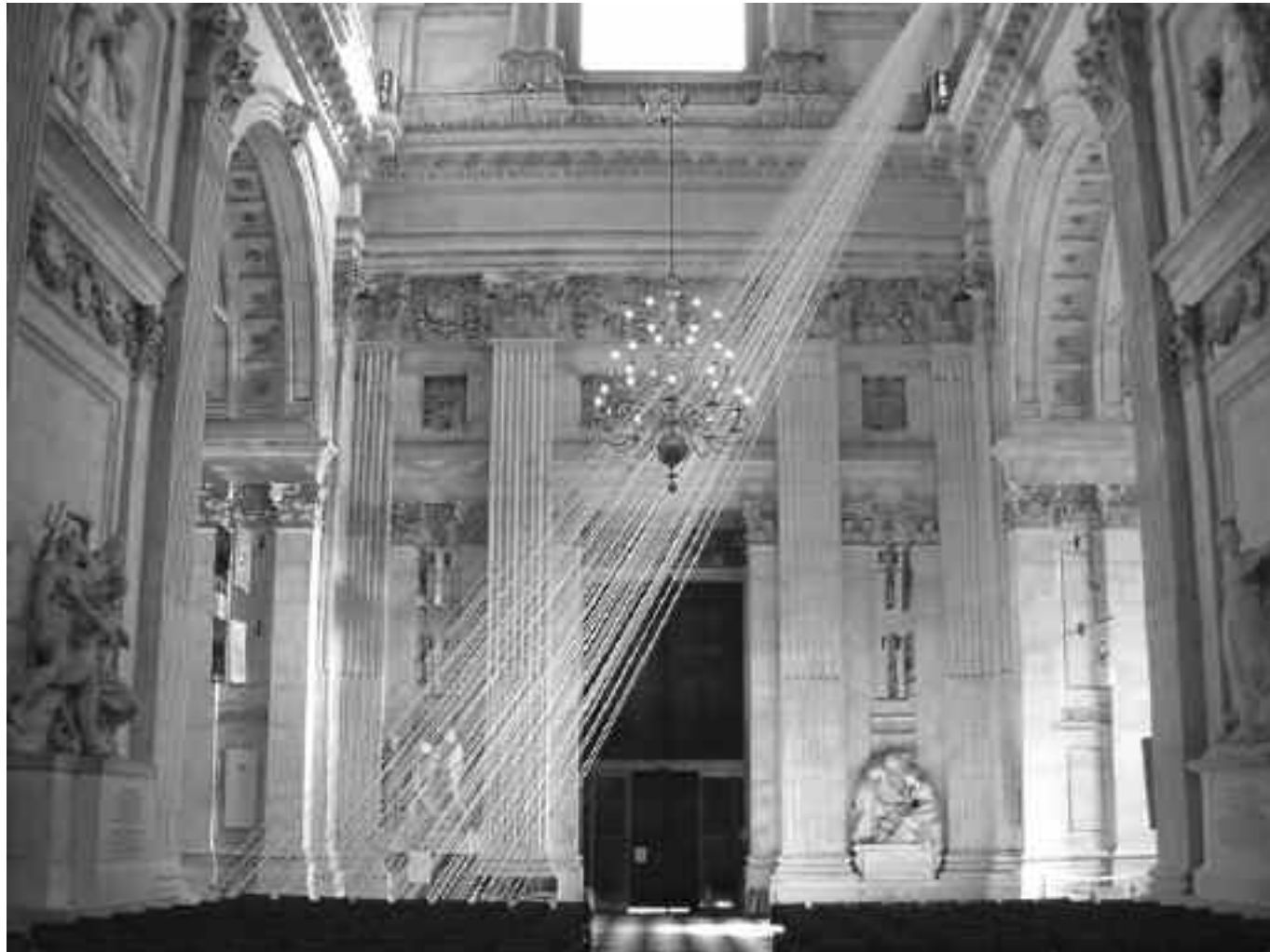
roving founder and former director, Tom Devonshire Jones, retired this summer, it is good to make strategic steps to follow some of the trails he blazed. And of course, the Awards are another way in which ACE tries to record and reward those whose understanding of the visual in religious contexts is well informed, sensitive (in so much as there cannot be a science to this endeavour) and sophisticated. *Art*

*and Christianity*, too, attempts in its pages to review and acknowledge the depth of this understanding be it at the level of the PhD art theory (pp.2-4), French holiday-makers (p.7) or from the pages of books (p.12-16). *Art and Christianity* embraces this variety and a new editorial board will be formed this autumn to ensure it is a vehicle for continued critical reflection as well as for debate and dialogue.

Laura Moffatt



The Bishop of Edinburgh, The Rt Revd Brian Smith blessing *Still* on 20 August 2006 in Old St Paul's.



Yoko Ono  
*Morning Beams for the City of London* 2006  
 Photo: Nigel Cutteridge

This summer St Paul's Cathedral played host to a series of artworks by Yoko Ono, bringing the work of this highly regarded artist to a far wider audience, and into a dramatic space that she considered ideal for their presentation. Using white ropes *Morning Beams* created a beautifully simple evocation of light filtering through into the cathedral's north transept. These radiant beams 'illuminated' *Cleaning Piece (Riverbed)*, a dry riverbed of stones that snaked its way to the far end of the transept. Finally, on the other side of the transept's door, *Wish Tree* echoed the trees in the temple courtyards of Ono's youth, to which she recalls writing out and tying wishes: 'Trees in temple courtyards are always filled with people's wish knots,' she says, 'which

looked like white flowers blossoming from afar.' In these interactive works visitors were invited to perform simple acts of self-reflection by taking a stone from the riverbed and placing it upon a 'mound of joy' or a 'mound of sorrow', or by writing out a wish and tying it to the tree.

To experience *Morning Beams* is to enjoy both the materiality of the work, its tangible substance as an art object, and a sense of its surprisingly ethereal presence, especially when seen, for instance, from the high vantage point of the Whispering Gallery, within the splendour of the Cathedral's voluminous space. But even close to it elicits an impression of objectified light if, for instance, one slowly moves around the 'beams', keeping them constantly in

sight. As one layer of ropes shifts behind another it produces the sensation of an evanescent, flickering light source, like sunlight through a canopy of trees.

*Wish Tree* inspired an exuberant and enthusiastic reaction, both from Cathedral visitors and passers-by, whose wishes ranged from the banally generic to the deeply personal, written in dozens of different languages. *Cleaning Piece* proved more baffling to some. Instructions inviting direct participation in an artwork seemed to many to be a new experience that left them uncertain how to respond, often checking with invigilators that they were allowed to take the stones. Where art is concerned instructions to artworks are usually of the 'Please do not touch'

variety. Though some responded to the invitation with what seemed a perfunctory automatic action others found in it an opportunity to partake in a ritual action which touched them deeply and offered a new and unanticipated experience of the cathedral.

*A woman takes a stone. Holding it in her hands she stands erect and still for some time before the mound of joy, eyes closed and clutching the stone to her chest. Her partner interrupts her with a comment and a smile, some casual comment which she brushes off with a murmur, holding onto the state of contemplation or prayer in which she is engaged. Eyes still closed she remains rigidly standing there in silent concentration as he moves away, rebuffed. Finally, she places the stone and walks away.*

Ono's artistic practice is rooted in both the Fluxus movement (in which she played an early pivotal role) and conceptual art, the former with its emphasis on performance, ephemerality and the rejection of traditional patterns of artistic production, and the latter exemplified by the dematerialisation of the art object, i.e. the privileging of ideas over objects. An abiding element in her work has been the involvement of an audience, if not always directly, through instructions to action. Very often these instructions were simply prompts to unlock the imagination; at other times they invited direct participation.

Over time her work has become more object-based yet always with a desire to involve the viewer in the process of its fulfilment. As such her working practice has been described in terms of 'praxis' rather than 'poesis', active rather than productive. Or, to put it another way, 'praxis' as a form of production which is not exhausted by the product itself. Thus she is following in what might be loosely termed a tradition of art that follows the insistence of Marcel Duchamp 'that no work of art is finished until completed by the spectator.' In Ono's work we rarely find completion but rather an ongoing dialogue between the work and the viewer through the latter's participation in the former, both in shaping its form and in responding to its ritual.

Thus Ono finds herself still in the vanguard of a contemporary art whose most recent theoretical expression is Nicolas Bourriaud's exploration of what he terms a practice of 'relational aesthetics'. Increasingly prevalent in



Yoko Ono *Cleaning Piece (Riverbed)* 2006.  
 Photo: Nigel Cutteridge

contemporary art practice, it emphasises interaction with, and the participation of, the public in the creation of art. For Bourriaud contemporary art since the 1990s has epitomised the Duchampian ideal through sociability, through acts of direct participation between an art work or an artist and their audience, the micro-community that emerges through 'a momentary grouping of participatory viewers'. In this way, he says, a contemporary work is no longer simply a space that one moves through, but becomes a time to be lived through, 'like an opening to unlimited discussion.'

For Bourriaud and the artistic practices he champions, the role of the viewer becomes so integral that, he predicts, one day a history of art will be written according to the people who pass through it: 'What human flow, governed by what forms, thus passes into art forms?' he asks. As a consequence of the centrality of this 'human flow' in the creation of art he considers one of the crucial questions that a work of art should answer to is: 'Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the place it defines?' It is in answer to these questions that simple anecdotes are interspersed throughout the text, offering witnessed glimpses of visitors' responses to the installation.

*A woman takes a stone, places it upon the mound of joy, then cries and hugs an older woman who is with her (her mother perhaps). An engagement with the mound of joy produces tears, but*

*are they tears of joy or sorrow? She appears to be very sad, but as we know, tears can be quite misleading.*

It may be that for this woman the ritual did indeed 'permit' her 'to enter into dialogue' with some process at work in her. She found a way to exist, perhaps briefly but effectively, in the space defined by the work.

*Two women place stones on the mound of sorrow. They leave them there for a while as they remain standing thoughtfully, perhaps prayerfully, looking at them. Then they transfer them to the mound of joy.*

One sensed that a process of catharsis had taken place, as though the stones, as bearers of sorrow, had performed an act of cleansing, which then enabled them to become representatives of joy.

Over and above the delight visitors took in the natural simplicity and appropriateness of the installation's form (as 'poesis'), such stories reflect what Bourriaud would define as its true form (as 'praxis'), as 'a coherent unit' that ushers in a way of viewing the world and in which the place of the participant is indispensable. In other words, form exists in the encounter, i.e. when it introduces human interactions. *Cleaning Piece* depends upon the responsiveness of an audience who become co-creators of the work through following the invitation to take a stone from the riverbed and place it upon the mound of joy or sorrow. Similarly, *Wish Tree* would remain bare and forlorn without the



enthusiastic response from people eager to add their wishes to its branches. The former tended to inspire private interaction between work and viewer while the latter encouraged a more communal ‘momentary grouping’ of participants. But both clearly reflected a ‘relational’ approach to the production and reception of art as central to Ono’s practice and exemplary of her valorisation of ritualised action. The temporary inclusion of *Morning Beams*, *Cleaning Piece* and *Wish Tree* in the life of the Cathedral was, in part, a recognition of the value of ritual at the level of the emotions and the sensual; that it has a place within a sacred environment alongside liturgical ritual and was often accorded comparable reverence.

*A man places several stones for sorrow and then immediately moves away. Some time later the same man returns to the work, walks around it, takes his time looking at the stones and ropes, and leaves again. A third time he returns. On this occasion he takes the same number of stones as before and places them on the mound of joy. Crouching besides them he lingers awhile in thought, brushes his hands, and walks away.*

The brushing of the hands, for instance, was an oft-repeated gesture that became a ritualised part of the participatory process. It was perhaps simply automatic, cleaning one’s hands after handling the dusty stones, but had a symbolic suggestion of completion about it also. One could see it as an integral element of the event, as though one’s joys and sorrows were left behind in the ritual ‘cleaning’ of hands.

*An Oriental man walks back and forth, between the riverbed and the mound of joy, carrying one stone at a time and placing it upon the mound. Altogether he places five or six stones. At the end of his repeated pilgrimage he brushes his hands and walks away smiling.*

*Morning Beams* was created for The Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, for an exhibition of Ono’s work in 1997 and joined with *Cleaning Piece* which had a much older history appearing in various forms since the 1960s. Naturally, within a context like St Paul’s, though evocations of natural light prevail, other resonances emerge that might never have occurred within its earlier secular setting. In a cathedral it is not only a vision of the beauty of sunlight that appears but inevitable associations with divinity. St Paul’s, after all,

is named after a saint who was a convert of light.

The work was also placed within an area of the Cathedral that it shared with Holman Hunt’s well-known and well-loved image of Christ as *The Light of the World*. An obvious conceptual relation arose from this proximity of artworks, just as a formal relation was apparent between *Morning Beams* and the paintings by Sergei Chepik, temporarily on display in the nave. It should be stressed that this was neither intentional nor desired (according to Paul Bayley, who co-ordinated the installation for ACE, it was more a question of finding a suitable space for the work than an attempt to formulate



Yoko Ono  
*Morning Beams for the City of London* and  
*Cleaning Piece (Riverbed)* 2006.

Photo: Nigel Cutteridge

certain aesthetic or conceptual relations). But equally resonances drawn from comparisons made cannot be denied their place within the overall reception of the work. Site-specificity demands the ‘cohabitation’, as Bourriaud calls it, of a work with its context. It is one of the challenges that any work of art might face within such a setting and broaches issues highly relevant to any discussion of contemporary art in churches, if that art is hoped in any way to be more than a decorative feature of the ecclesiastical space. In such a context emanations of light cannot help but express a religious impulse, over and above their playful mimesis of the natural world. This could be seen as burdening the work with unwanted implications, but equally may enrich it in unforeseen ways. At times this

cohabitation produced a surprising interaction of ritual practices from visitors.

*A man takes a stone from sorrow. With this stone in one hand he genuflects, kisses the cross around his neck and places the stone on joy, keeping his eyes on Hunt’s painting of Christ the whole time. A woman lays stones on both sorrow and joy. As she places the second stone upon joy she is visibly mouthing words, a prayer perhaps, and keeps her eyes similarly fixed upon *The Light of the World*.*

Ono’s art is often disarmingly simple and approachable, but offers the possibilities of individual readings and multiple responses. As Michael Bracewell writes, her work is truly democratic in that it attempts to speak to everyone: ‘There are no games, traps or clever tricks in Ono’s art. What you see is what there is, and the rest is solely concerned with the viewer’s individual experience of the work.’ Conceptually the installation’s closest affinities are with one of Bourriaud’s chief exemplars of ‘relational aesthetics’, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose work shares many of Ono’s preoccupations. In his exhibitions piles of wrapped sweets and stacks of prints also invite viewer participation, but this time by taking the work away with them, thus depleting the work to the point of disappearance. As well as the necessity of participation, therefore, ‘praxis’ is also written into these works through the role of duration as an element of their form. What that duration is, depends upon the viewer or participant. As Paul Bayley observed, if every visitor took a stone and placed it on the mound the ritualistic, relational aspect of the work would be over in a few days. Somehow, organically, an effective level of participation is achieved.

Relational aesthetics is not a return to a celebration of immateriality. Objects are often an intrinsic part of the language, but with a resistance to their ossification into precious objects. Instead the work produces a relationship with the world (evocations of joy and sorrow, expressed wishes) that is envisaged through a relationship with the object (stones, slips of paper tied to a tree). Ono’s art invites us to imagine, not only peace (to which the badges given away at the exhibition attested) but wishes coming true, the affirmation of joy and acknowledgement of sorrow. All this is achieved through ‘an ideal balance between form and its

programmed disappearance, between visual beauty and modest gestures, between childlike wonder in front of the image and the complexity of the levels at which it is read.’ These words of Bourriaud’s, on the work of Gonzalez-Torres, reads like a perfect description of Ono’s creation.

*A woman places a stone upon joy and blows it a kiss.*

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Yoko Ono’s *Morning Beams for the City of London* was at St Paul’s Cathedral as part of the City of London Festival 26 June – 15 July 2006.

- 1 Yoko Ono, from *Morning Beams for the City of London*, St Paul’s Cathedral 2006.
- 2 ‘The word praxis derives from the Greek “action” or “doing” and refers to acts, courses of action, interaction, or the exercise of practicing an art, science, or skill.’ Poesis, by contrast, is ‘the making or production of things’. Kristine Stiles, in Janet Jenkins (ed), *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center 1983, p.93.
- 3 Marcel Duchamp, in Chrissie Iles, *Have You Seen the Horizon Lately?*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art 1997, p.19.
- 4 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Réel 2002, p.58.
- 5 Ibid, p.15.
- 6 Ibid, p.74.
- 7 Ibid, p.109.
- 8 Ibid, p.19.
- 9 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Réel 2002, p.58.

*On 20 August this year, ACE hosted a lunch at Edinburgh’s City Art Gallery followed by a lecture on ‘Figuration and Abstraction in Religious Art’ given by Professor David Jasper of the University of Glasgow. The event was part of a celebration of Still, the winning entry of ACE’s 2005 Award for an Artwork in Ecclesiastical Space by Alison Watt, sited in the Memorial Chapel of Old St Paul’s Episcopal Church, Edinburgh. Colin Reid’s glass sculpture, The Ichthus font, ACE’s prize for the Award, is on display at the City Art Gallery until early October before its return to the V&A. Earlier the same day Still, together with a portable altar in wood for the same Chapel, was blessed at High Mass in Old St Paul’s by the Rt Revd Brian Smith, Bishop of Edinburgh. Following these blessings, Canon Ian Paton, the Church’s Rector, preached a sermon about the new commissions. The company attending the lunch and lecture were welcomed by the Bishop and the new ACE Acting Director, Laura Moffatt. David Jasper’s paper will be included in a future ACE publication. Meanwhile, what follows here is an appreciation of the re-ordered Memorial Chapel.*

Nick Clarke, the maker of the chapel’s new altar in wood, had the difficult task of conceiving a response to *Still* and also of creating a focus for worship in a chapel with such strong vertical elements. As a former worshipper at Old St Paul’s, he knew well the challenge of this space. Built in 1924, the scale and proportions are intimate enough, but the viewer’s eye is lifted up on all sides. Even the entrance at a far corner of the nave is affected by a little flight of steps through the pierced wall of simple gothic windows. Thus the volumes of the chapel are clearly contained within a ‘higher’ and separate space from the church’s nave. From there one receives intriguing glimpses of *Still* which draws the viewer or worshipper to ascend within and see the whole of it. Then to the left is a soaring wall of grey render marked only by the names of parishioners killed in the Great War, now skilfully made present in three dimensional lettering of bronze. Facing them through the open arched wall are the figures – high up again – of the Crucifixion and Majestas carved into the reredos of the High Altar. A warmer suffused lighting streams from these and the sight of it, at least, offers an emphatic contrast to the otherwise colder heaven where

these fallen are remembered. Then at the climax of these two very different walls, placed as a reredos above the original stone altar, is Alison Watt’s painting *Still*, the clever juxtaposition of cold and warmer tones brilliantly respecting the architectural context of the work.

So, in turn, does Clarke’s altar. In a design that is both self-effacing and very elegant, this new work is a most confident complement to *Still* and, indeed, completes the chapel. By bringing the eye down, it provides a delicate and necessary counterbalance to the striking verticality of its surrounds. The upper register picks up the horizontal gothic rhythms of the open arcade to the sanctuary while its surface of rare peach wood hints at a warmer ‘south’ where men and women can relax at their own table and with room enough to dance around it. Here is an altar on a human scale, eloquent of God’s incarnation, with natural sightlines for the sitting or kneeling worshipper. Approachable, and full of character in its own right, this is a wonderfully confident example of liturgical furnishing at its best. Literally, it makes the space work.

In particular, the altar fulfils the need for more intimacy for its regular context of a said weekday Communion. East-facing celebrations on the raised steps may always have felt too austere for tiny congregations in this particular space and light; the new altar, for a west-facing celebrant, at the same level and nearer the communicants, enhances the original purposes and walls of this place of memorial. Eternity is celebrated in the midst of a living community while the longer view of it in Watt’s painting remains in proper focus without dominating the liturgy.

Both the artists and Ian Paton, the Rector who commissioned them on behalf of the PCC, deserve praise for a decisive part in the process. ACE’s Award emphasises collaboration within a commission, so satisfyingly interpreted at Edinburgh, in which a whole sequence of creative thought emerged. Unusually, it was the artist who proposed the initial substitution of a dark red curtain which hung so dully at the climax of this space. It was brave of her to suggest its new treatment and brave of the church community to take seriously the development of her scheme. ACE exists in no small measure to