



**Becoming the Artist: A Literature Review Examining Spectatorship
of Yoko Ono's Performance Pieces
By Juria Miyabe**

Abstract

This research paper examines the role, appearance, and effect of audience in performing arts through audience participation, interaction, and interpellation. In particular, this phenomenon will be examined through the work of Yoko Ono, an inventive practitioner of conceptual and performance art in the 1960s. Specifically, this paper will analyze three representative pieces by Ono: *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* (1965), the *Instruction* series (1961), and *Cut Piece* (1965). In each of these performance works, Ono challenges conventional definitions of art. In her artwork, she experiments with the audience through several techniques, including utilizing imperative instructions that invite audiences to contribute to the artistic performance. All three works experiment in distinct but connected ways that blur the line between artist and audience, evoking an opposition to the traditional definition of audience in the arts, where the action involved is limited to viewing, hearing, reading, and listening. The way that Ono has invited her audiences to participate in her performing pieces resonates with Jacques Rancière's theory of the emancipated spectator; I argue that Ono's work is aligned with this type of spectatorship that implies an anti-capitalist logic.

Introduction

To discuss the approach of Ono on performance art and spectatorship, I will begin by introducing the context and Ono as a performing artist. I will begin with describing three artworks based on the form, process, and the relationship between the art, the performer, and the audience. To portray the approach of Ono, I will make reference to *Cut Piece*, *Instruction* series, and *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ*, discussing the intention involved in these three works.

Introduction to Performance Art & Contextualizing Ono

"Live gestures have constantly been used as a weapon against the conventions of established art" (Goldberg 7). Performance art has its origins in the early 20th century and is closely identified with the progress of the avant-garde. In the 1950s and 1960s, performance art began to emerge as a distinct genre, with artists experimenting with new forms of expression and challenging traditional boundaries. Because performance is ephemeral, the audience needs to observe the details, messages, and information all visually. It has been proved that verbally documenting a performance will alter the origin and create variation. Historically, audiences of performance art are invited to be involved in the performance, which limits their perspectives. The oppositions and equivalences that structure the spectator and the theater are in reality relations of inequality, domination, and subjection.

A very influential practitioner of conceptual and performance art in the 1960s was the artist and musician Ono. Her participatory works granted audiences permission to engage on a tangible level, despite their passive role in many of her unconventional participatory works. One of the well-known pieces of Ono, *Cut Piece*, is meant to bring the audience into the work itself and have the artist and audience interact on an intimate level. The instruction allowed the audience to cut off pieces of her clothing with scissors. In this relationship, Ono showed an inverse of the domination from the performer on the spectator. Ono played a passive role in this performance, and she stayed on the receiving side accepting the audience's cut, applying action to herself. *Cut Piece* allowed the concept of transposition between the two sides to be practical. Moreover, this has revealed Ono's philosophy of audience and an active spectatorship in performing arts.

Sky Piece to Jesus Christ is a unique and innovative performing piece created by Ono in 1965. The piece involved wrapping members of an orchestra in gauze bandages during a concert, forcing them to stop playing their instruments. Ono provided direct instructions to the audience, including making noise during the concert and clapping at the end of the performance, which symbolized supporting her motivation and using the audience as components of the art. This piece highlights the importance of spectatorship in art, as the audience is not limited to traditional definitions of witnessing the performance but acts as a component supporting the completeness of the art.

Additionally, Ono's *Instruction* series invites the audience to complete intricate instructions, with the performer's position becoming neglectable. Excluding the action of providing guidance, the performer was not involved in this art in other ways. The lack of involvement of the performer allowed the spectator to be directly exposed to the creation of the artwork. Ono, once again, completed the reversal between audience and performer. In this process, audiences are provided with greater freedom, giving them the right to express themselves, as well as add their vision and thinking to the art they create. The art no longer expresses the ideal of the artist, instead communicating multiple visions from a larger population. The *Instruction* series once again reveals Ono's pursuit of communalism in performing art between the performer and the spectator.

These three pieces represent distinct experiments that Ono constructed to show her approach to communalism in spectatorship and an equality between the performer and the audience that she seeks. All three art pieces serve to reveal and show Ono's philosophy of audience in performance art.

This paper is based on undeniable limitations: the video used for observation of the performance is not the original performance. Some of the actions that the audience performs are different from the origin due to extraneous factors. This will affect the validity of the analysis that is constructed based on these videos but targeting the original pieces.

These three representative pieces of Ono show the diversity of her approaches to inviting the audience to be active and interact with the art piece through both indirect and direct ways to reveal the subtext of the art. This allows the spectators to engage as a 'living community.' Ono's

inventive construction of performing art brought her to be the pioneer of the field. As she developed her influence that was never limited in Japan or the US, inactive spectators in performing arts vanished with the abolition of art and theater according to the theory of The Emancipated Spectator of Jacques Rancière.

Methods

I have based the review on three of Ono's artworks. Descriptive works included word description documentation and video documentation of the performance and artwork. This descriptive work helped me develop an audience perspective which then allowed me to evaluate the performance connecting to the psychological discussion based on Schema Theory, philosophical and theoretical evaluations mainly based on Jacques Rancière's theory and Peggy Phelan. The descriptive works supported the development of my arguments on the psychological experimental approach and intention of Ono. Adding on, the critical works of Ono's work served as expanding the scope and perspective of this review. The critical works reveal the significance and characteristics of the construction, theme, and variety of spectators' response, addressing patterns and global generalizations between works.

Literature Discussion and Review

To discuss and address Ono's intention to invite and inspire the creative mind of spectators, I will examine three artworks: *Cut Piece*, *Instruction series*, and *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ*.

Cut Piece

The best-known artwork of Ono, *Cut Piece*, involves Ono kneeling on an empty stage with a pair of scissors in front of her. She invites audience members to come on stage one by one, cut off any piece of her clothing, and take the piece back to their seats as a souvenir. The ending of the performance is decided by Ono in the moment (Phaidon). The theme of this performance is not directly presented. However, many critics believe this performance reveals the vulnerability of women. Because of her sexuality, the action of taking away, cutting off her clothes, and gradually exposing her body, there are interpretations of the marginalization and social status of women (Gallagher). This art displays the inequality and stereotyped passive role of women in the construction of society, as hinted at when Ono remains motionless throughout the performance. The audience is then allowed to use a pair of scissors to cut out a random-sized piece of cloth from Ono's cloth. Afterwards, the piece of cloth is allowed to be kept as a souvenir for the spectators (DiRuggiero).

In this piece, the spectator is given symbolism. The prop—scissors—are the "weapon" that is used against Ono, symbolizing women. The "weapon" can indicate several interpretations, such as restraint from society, beauty standards, and sexual roles. The significant characteristic of scissors or taking away allows us to visualize society seizing

property, rights, and liberty from women. By holding scissors and applying the action of taking on , the audience creates symbols of society and authority.

Nevertheless, there can be elucidations based on different perspectives. As one suggests, the way Ono's clothing is cut and torn replicates the clothing of the people of Japan after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 (DiRuggiero). Contrary to the traditional definition of spectatorship involved in performing arts, which has been defined as passive as compared to the mastery of the teacher and the ignorance of a learner, Ono forced spectators to create a direct contribution to the art through the action of cutting. Through deliberately provided instruction, invited the audience to be a part of the performance. She utilized the active engagement of the audience to show the passive objectification of women. The action of cutting allowed the loss of agency of the artist, symbolizing women through an approachable process, allowing the abstract description of women's situation to be substantiated through Ono being stripped, scrutinized, and violated both physically and through the audiences' gaze.

This construction and design of this art piece inspired the interaction between the audience and the performer. This allowed the audience to be active contributing components of the art piece that serves to present the main theme of the artwork. This further shows a distinguished relationship between the spectators and the art piece. Compared to *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ*, *Cut Piece* also shows Ono's approach towards spectatorship in performing arts and the tenuous line dividing and connecting spectators to an artwork.

Additionally, the change in audiences' attitudes towards the given instruction reveals Ono's experimental purpose on humans' moral and ethical bottom lines using evolving intensity of behavior and the choice of participating. The audience was apprehensive at first; they quickly cut tiny parts of her skirt and shirt, then headed back to their seats. But as the performance progressed, they gained confidence. Ono raised her hands to conceal her body as one man approached and chopped off the front strap of her bra (DiRuggiero). When the spectators were shown that consequences and punishments are not involved in the action of cutting a piece of cloth, they were simultaneously subjected to a condition that allows moral disengagement, a psychological process that permits individuals to justify their negative actions by distancing themselves from the repercussions of their behavior (Prooijen). This phenomenon tends to occur when there is a group of spectators participating in the event. This enabled individuals in the spectator group to minimize or deny responsibility for themselves by condemning others for the leadership. Building on *Cut Piece*, the *Instruction* series enhances the involvement of the spectator that leads to an in-depth contribution to the artwork. She aims to reverse this relationship and place the audience as the performer.

Instruction series

Continuing with her development of spectatorship, Ono created the *Instruction series*. It is the piece that enacts Ono's ultimate goal of using performance artwork to emancipate spectators. After creating pieces that invite spectators to participate in the performance, Ono

decided to distill the works to the text itself and allow the audience to fully be in charge of the artwork: "Ono created instructions that would allow each viewer to transform an idea with his or her vision" (*Ono. Instructions for Paintings*).

In the *Grape Fruit* collection, a collection of several instruction pieces of Ono, she utilized poem-structured instructions to emphasize and apply a sense of rhythm. For instance, in VOICE FOR SOPRANO, Ono writes: "Scream. / against the wind / against the wall / against the sky" (Ono page 4). In this piece, Ono applied parallelism to emphasize the rhythm of the piece. The action "scream," like *Cut Piece* and *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ*, shows empathy on the ephemerality of this process. The instructions "scream" does not show eternity like other forms of art, emphasizing the conditions that led to the acceptance of the action of screaming. Adding on, as the instructions continue to progress, the WALKING PIECE characterizes spectators as stockers: "Walk in the footsteps of the person in front. / on the ground / in mud / in snow / on ice / in water."

Ono in both examples encourages the audience to be involved in the artwork through actions that are not expected to be practiced in daily life. The artwork encourages the spectators to extend the acceptance of humiliation. Thus, through following the instruction, it prompts to break the frame of activity that is built by the social norm and is added onto the spectators. Ono, using her artwork from the *Instruction* series, intends to indirectly promote the audience to rebel on stereotypical social norms by following the instructions she composed. Nevertheless, the *Instruction* series succeeds in reversing the circumstances, audience engagement, and performer/observer roles; Ono turned the audience into performers. She established the scenario in which the audience was prompted to obey directions, which sparked their creativity and encouraged the development of performances.

In the *Instruction* series, Ono often requires spectators to define themselves. At the start and the end of a collection of instructions, *A Book of Instructions and Drawings*, Ono intentionally designed a page for the spectator to provide personal information, such as gender, sex, name, color, height, weight, address, occupation, and others. Throughout the collection, Ono constantly requires and encourages the spectator to reflect on their objectivity or truth as an audience participant.

Cut Piece and *Instruction* series, in this order, show the process of Ono's growing intensity toward encouraging active participation of spectators in the performance work. *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ*, on the other hand, displays another aspect of Ono's approach to spectatorship. *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* shows an indirect interaction relationship between artwork and spectators. Also, *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* shows an analogous aspect with *Cut Piece* and *Instruction* series. The performance experiments with the reaction from the spectators as a form of contribution to the appearance of the performance.

Sky Piece to Jesus Christ

Sky Piece to Jesus Christ is one of the representative performing pieces of Ono that was performed in 1965. The title of the piece is a reference to John Cage, who had the same initials

as Jesus Christ. This shows that, for Ono, John Cage is celebrated like Jesus Christ, which reveals Cage's importance as an iconic figure among the avant-garde (*Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* 1965). In the title, "sky" symbolizes liberty. Sky, as a symbol of freedom, is a common theme in art and literature, and it is often associated with transcendence, spirituality, and the infinite (5 Signs in the Sky That Point to Christian Truths). The theme of the piece is centered around the idea of both inner and outer freedom, along with the contrast between that freedom and the bonds that can expropriate freedom from people. The theme is presented through the orchestra members being wrapped in gauze bandages and forced to stop playing their instruments, creating a visual and auditory contrast between freedom and bondage.

This piece allows audiences to be involved in the performance by witnessing the procedure via which musicians in an orchestra are compelled to stop playing their instruments during a concert and are covered in gauze bandages. The visual and auditory contrast between the orchestra members playing their instruments and then being wrapped in bandages and forced to stop playing could create a sense of disorientation and confusion for the audience. Through the process, Ono communicated the theme using the symbols of the bandage and the scherzo, along with constraint and freedom. This evoked reflection on the connection with the society.

As mentioned, the title of this piece refers to John Cage. Cage was a key figure in the Fluxus movement, which was a major influence on Ono's work. Fluxus was a loose collective of artists who produced performance "events" that included enactments of scores, "Neo-Dada" noise music, and time-based works, as well as concrete poetry, visual art, urban planning, architecture, design, literature, and publishing. Many Fluxus artists shared anti-commercial and anti-art sensibilities, and the ideas and practices of Cage heavily influenced the movement. Ono's work is often recognized by specificities such as conceptual and performance art, as well as the high degree of participation of spectators. This specificity of spectatorship in her art is a key aspect of Cage's philosophy, which emphasized the importance of chance, indeterminacy, and the everyday in art.

In *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ*, Ono presents her approach to spectatorship in performing arts through the utilization of components of the art. Also, she conveys, through the traits of audiences' reactions to, her pursuit of chance in performing arts. In the performing process, when the players are performing and when they are completely enveloped., the scene is intended to trigger the audience to laugh based on the video (*Sky Piece to Jesus Christ*). These actions are symbolic and support Ono's motivation to make them an integral part of the art, which helped to convey and establish the thematic and critical messages that the art is concerned with.

Spectatorship in this art is not limited to the traditional definition of inviting the audience to a performance but serves an integral part of supporting the art's integrity. During the performance, Ono allowed them to generate understanding and contribute their distinct understanding to the art piece. This reveals chance, indeterminacy, and the everyday that are brought by Cage's philosophy. Chance, uncertainty, and capriciousness of *Sky Piece to Jesus*

Christ all accentuate the non-reproductive power of performance art, which is the nature of performance art examined by Peggy Phelan, a prominent performance theorist. It is impractical to control the audiences, arrangement, lighting, location, and other extraneous factors involved in this performance to be unchanging between performances and through time. The extraneous variables played in this piece allow the suggestion of a distinction between performative and validity. The uncontrolled factors support the performance to resist validity and accuracy in the piece, highlighting the unique qualities of performance that cannot be reduced through other forms of art.

In this piece, applauding and laughing appear at inappropriate times when the performers are wrapped together, which generally contradicts spectators' past experiences despite the cultural background of the audience. In this situation, performers from an orchestra wrapped together and forced to stop playing go against a situation of orchestra performance that triggers the action of applause from human schema. Schema is a mental representation of the world; it is based on our experience (Cherry). The audience is forced to face this stimulus that does not show a match to experience. Thus, the audience may choose to utilize actions that are for an orchestra performance directly on this artwork.

This further causes strangeness for the audience. Accommodation is then created; a new schema is generated in this process. This artwork explores the process of encoding, storage, and retrieval of sensory information through creating an unusual stimulus in a familiar condition to the audience. In contrast to traditional theatrical performances, which are meant to mirror the lives of people in the community, the creation of a new schema illustrates a distinct aspect of Ono's spectatorship strategy: the effect of the performance on the audience member's mental image of the world. Thus, through *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* Ono showed the impact of past experiences, watching theater performances, on the reaction of humans to a new situation. From the documented video of *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ*, the majority of audiences have reacted by applauding; in other words, the audience has chosen to use a customary reaction on a new stimulus. Ono aims to evoke the reflective process of spectators on unconscious reactions that are restricted by experience and stereotypes that has affected the evaluative process of humans. She further encourages society to be sensitive about surroundings and the stimuli they are exposed to.

Furthermore, the action of applauding symbolizes celebration and congratulation. The timing of the action when all performers from the orchestra are wrapped and connected shows high restrictions on any movement, such as the ability to see, speak, and play, encouraging doubts, interpretations of the audience, and anyone interpreting the performance to form an eruption. As the audience applauded and applauded this performance, they could hardly fail to realize that the players were still bound by white bandages. The contradiction between the bondage and the freedom that is supposed to be celebrated serves to cause the audience, and then society, to question whether the performers are "free." This in turn guides the audience to explore and discover the definition of freedom. Both of these purposes are achieved through the



audience's participation in the performance as well as clapping, which add to the ideology of *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ*.

Discussion and Conclusion

In my analysis, I have explored the experimental nature of Ono's art and its impact on the creative mind by examining the ways in which audiences interpret and engage with her pieces. Utilizing Schema Theory as a lens for analysis, I have found that Ono challenges traditional schemas and expectations, as well as the theories of Phelan and Rancière, which have helped me to develop a comprehensive review and understanding of her intention. In particular, the artworks *Cut Piece*, *Instruction series*, and *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* provide detailed insight into Ono's approach to spectatorship from diverse perspectives, symbolizing the consistent experimental purpose of her works. These pieces not only invite audience participation but also experiment with their perspectives and reactions, revealing Ono's objective to utilize experimental components as part of the performance. The experimental components imparted supportive intentions on the reaction from the spectators for demonstrating themes of Ono's pieces. As a result, *Cut Piece*, *Instruction series*, and *Sky Piece to Jesus Christ* reflect both sides; the intention to construct a performer experience of the spectator and the aim to involve experimental approaches of Ono's approach to spectatorship.



References

- “5 Signs in the Sky That Point to Christian Truths.” *Aleteia*, 1 Sept. 2017, aleteia.org/2017/09/01/5-signs-in-the-sky-that-point-to-christian-truths/.
- Bicchieri, Cristina, et al. “Social Norms.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 24 Sept. 2018, plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-norms/.
- “A BOOK~· of Instruction and Drawings Yok.o Ono - Monoskop.” *Monoskop*, monoskop.org/images/archive/6/64/20190320203953!Ono__Grapefruit_A_Book_of_Instructions_and_Drawings_2000.pdf. Accessed 21 Nov. 2023.
- Custodio, Isabel, and Christophe Cherix. *Ono’s 22 Instructions for Paintings | Magazine | Moma*, 10 May 2019, www.moma.org/magazine/articles/61.
- Goldberg, Roselee. *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*. Thames and Hudson, 1979.
- Kendra Cherry, MEd. “What Role Do Schemas Play in the Learning Process?” *Verywell Mind*, Verywell Mind, 12 Mar. 2023, www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-schema-2795873.
- Meg DiRuggiero, ’18. Published on December 6. “Ono’s ‘Cut Piece.’” *Museum of Art*, 31 Mar. 2023, www.bates.edu/museum/2017/12/06/-onos-cut-piece/.
- “Passive Objectification: Vulnerability in Ono’s Participatory Art.” *Passive Objectification: Vulnerability in Ono’s Participatory Art | Writing Program*, www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-8/gallagher/. Accessed 21 Nov. 2023.
- Phaidon. “Ono’s Cut Piece Explained.” *PHAIDON*, www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/may/18/-ono-s-cut-piece-explained/. Accessed 21 Nov. 2023.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.
- Prooijen, Jan-Willem Van. “2 Motives for Punishmen.” *The Moral Punishment Instinct*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2018.
- “Sky Piece to Jesus Christ .” *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 Apr. 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeKv1sB7pw8>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2023.



“Sky Piece to Jesus Christ 1965.” *Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*,
www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/exhibition/pieza-cielo-para-jesucristo-sky-piece-to-jesus-christ-1965. Accessed 11 Dec. 2023.

“Sky Piece to Jesus Christ 1965.” *Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*,
www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/exhibition/pieza-cielo-para-jesucristo-sky-piece-to-jesus-christ-1965. Accessed 21 Nov. 2023.

Ono. Instructions for Paintings. 1961/1962 | Moma, www.moma.org/audio/playlist/15/371.
Accessed 21 Nov. 2023.