

# TRANSCRIPT

*Hear, Now*  
Episode 11

Yoko Ono:  
MEND PIECE  
for London

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving special access to the ideas that shape the artworks. My name is Jane Scarth, Curator of Public Programmes, introducing you to today's episode which looks in depth at our new exhibition, 'Yoko Ono: MEND PIECE for London', an installation by the world-renowned artist which invites visitors to participate in repairing fragments of broken ceramics. Delving into this powerful piece, curator Cameron Foote is in conversation with arts historian Midori Yoshimoto, a specialist in post-war Japanese and American art, including the Fluxus Movement, who has written extensively on Ono's work.

We also hear from art therapist Nicky Roland to consider the ways Ono encourages mindfulness and a contemplation of healing through this instructional work.

The exhibition is free to view in galleries five and six from the 25th of August 2021 until the 2nd of January 2022, and must be booked in advance.

CF: I can almost guarantee that you will have heard of Yoko Ono. Perhaps you have encountered her experimental pop music, or her decades-long campaigning for peace and other activist causes. Today we will be discussing her artwork.

Ono was born in Tokyo in 1933 before moving to the US with her family in the mid-1950s. After studying at Sarah Lawrence College in upstate New York she quickly became a catalytic figure within the avant-garde scenes

in New York, hosting a series of concerts and art installations in her downtown loft featuring the likes of artist Simone Forti, Jackson Mac Low, Robert Morris and La Monte Young.

Over the ensuing decades she lived in New York, London and Tokyo, and influenced the development of both Fluxus and Conceptual Art movements through her instruction-based and performance artwork.

Entering the two upstairs rooms at the gallery you will find two simple plain white tables. On the centre of each table is a small pile of broken pottery, cups and saucers, and some simple materials: string, glue, twine and tape. The key to the exhibition is a set of instructions by Yoko Ono printed on the wall; 'mend carefully, think of mending the world at the same time'.

At the time of recording, a couple of weeks into the display, there's been an extraordinary response from visitors. Not many of the mended objects placed on shelves around the room look like cups and saucers. You can find some images online that people have posted on social media. Among the contributions are a stack of curved sections of cups, very tall and precariously bound together with string. Someone has made a kind of heart shape out of two cup handles. My favourite is a small single piece of pottery, someone has very neatly wound a piece of string round and round it so it is completely obscured.

With our two guests we will be thinking about 'MEND PIECE for London' in the broader context of Yoko Ono's work, and also considering what it might mean to mend something today.

I'm delighted to welcome Midori Yoshimoto, an art historian specialising in post-1945 Japanese art, with a focus on Fluxus, intermedia, and women artists.

This work that we're discussing today, Yoko Ono first presented at an exhibition at Indica Gallery in London, a countercultural art gallery that operated out of a basement in a book shop in West London.

What form did the artwork take in this exhibition and how did it relate to some of the other works that were in that display?

MY: It was a smashed white teacup accompanied by a tube of china glue, a needle and thread on a round white pedestal. Responding to the title on the plaque, 'Mending Piece I', visitors attempted to put the broken teacup together.

Other works included a painting to hammer a nail, which was a white-painted wood panel with a hammer attached by a chain. A viewer was invited to hammer a nail into it.

Also there was another one called 'Add Colour' painting, which consisted of a white wood panel, paints and brushes.

All of these white objects were presented as a cohesive whole as they were all do-it-yourself art-making kits, so to speak.

CF: That's amazing. So what you're saying really is the exhibition contained all these white-painted objects, and they change and evolve through the participation of visitors. Could you speak some more about the significance and context of Ono's open-ended approach

to making artwork? How was the exhibition received by critics?

MY: This exhibition was actually known as 'Yoko at Indica', in short, but the longer title was 'Unfinished Paintings, Instruction Paintings and Unfinished Objects by Yoko Ono'. So the main concept was that all her works were unfinished without audience participation. So Yoko began writing instructions as art around 1960, and she exhibited them for the first time at AG Gallery in New York run by the future impresario of Fluxus, George Maciunas. Eventually Fluxus would propagate event scores, a form of instructions as an art for anyone to perform, because she treated words as art very early, she is considered one of the pioneers of Conceptual Art today. But she avoided her art becoming too institutionalised, rather she was more interested in having everyone to become an artist and experience art making.

Back then at the time of the Indica Gallery show, a journalist, Mario Amaya wrote in the Financial Times, it read; 'Miss Ono is certainly not producing museum objects for timeless duration, but works which change, involve, destroy or develop, in terms of the viewer himself who can manipulate them in his hands or with his mind'.

CF: So this work, which was titled at that time 'Mending Piece I', was shown at Indica Gallery in physical form; but really you're saying that the concepts and the ideas behind the work were something that had developed over the course of several years in her practice. And I think in 1964, just a couple of years previously, she published a book titled Grapefruit, that contained instructions for making around 170 participatory artworks. And some of

them in this book are very easily realised, but others were completely impossible.

So one of the examples was titled 'Shadow Piece', dated 1963, and it just says; put your shadows together until they become one. And then there's another text titled 'Collecting Piece II', and it's amongst several that relate in some way to 'Mend Piece', and it reads; break a contemporary museum into pieces with the means you have chosen, collect the pieces and put them together again with glue. Can you talk a little bit more about Ono's method of creating artworks using instructions?

MY: Yes. You're right about many of her instructions being impossible to realise. Readers of her instructions have complete freedom however in interpreting these instructions. In many aspects her work is like a mind play or an exercise in your mind to expand your imagination. Some may call it a poem even. Ono liked to call them a form of wish sometimes too.

She was remembering the time when she and her family escaped the war in the Japanese countryside. And then she talks about her experience of looking at the sky with her little brother, and played by imagining various foods from the shape of clouds. From early on she knew the power of the imagination was a key to survive the often difficult life.

CF: That's an amazing insight into her early years, and where this idea of the instruction might have come from. But since then, and since the 1960s, 'Mend Piece' has been shown many different times and in different contexts; and Ono often changes the instructions that accompanies the artwork, so the exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery has the instruction; 'mend carefully, think of mending the world at the same time'. How do

you interpret this invitation to mend the world? Are there ways in which this work relates to Ono's broader activism?

MY: Well, Yoko changed the title of the piece to 'Mend Peace', (P-E-A-C-E), after 9/11 2001 in particular, when her retrospective 'Yes Yoko Ono' exhibition opened at the MIT Visual Arts Centre in Cambridge Massachusetts. She said "it's not mending the cup so much as what you think while you're mending it; and so mending peace is to mend the world. And when you're mending the cup imagine mending the world, I like to do it all together". So I think that very clear idea of using this for the sake of world peace came up after 9/11 but Yoko also consistently used her art and music to call attention to making the world more peaceful, even one step at a time. We might recall her billboard campaign with John Lennon in the late '60s called 'War Is Over If You Want It', which was put up around the world as a message against the Vietnam War.

CF: So that's a really fascinating point to end, I think, making that relationship between Yoko Ono's anti-war campaigning since the '60s, and the ways in which this work 'MEND PIECE for London' could in some sense spark people to think about ways in which they might mend the world today. So thank you very much, Midori Yoshimoto.

MY: Well, thank you for inviting me.

JS: I'm here with Nicky Roland, a mindfulness-based art therapy teacher, to talk about the ways that 'MEND PIECE for London' can make a connection between mending, healing and care.

What kind of art therapy do you practise?

NR: I studied art therapy at Goldsmith's and then I also trained as a mindfulness meditation teacher. So for the last ten years I've been integrating both mindfulness meditation and art therapy in what I offer.

JS: And what do you mean when you talk about mindfulness? What does this practice in daily life mean to you?

NR: Mindfulness is quite encompassing and wide-ranging. One way of defining mindfulness is paying attention in the present moment with attitudes of being less judgemental, and kind; so it's about being aware. And personally, I think that the aspect of focusing on compassion and self-compassion is really integral. So, the way I teach mindfulness is the way that we are aware but also being aware in a way that's kind, and that we can develop attitudes of compassion and self-compassion. And in the teaching I'll also be introducing aspects of mindfulness as paying attention to body, to sensations in body, to feelings, our emotions, felt sense, and our thoughts and the nature of our thoughts and how we relate to thoughts; so all of those aspects come into mindfulness teaching.

JS: And so the instructions for 'MEND PIECE for London', which is Yoko Ono's work that we're talking about in this episode, is 'mend carefully, think of mending the world at the same time'. And I know that you visited the exhibition, and I'm curious to know if you think that this work does encourage mindfulness.

NR: I was quite interested in the moment, the arriving to the table in the gallery space, and I was thinking of the moment of having scissors, glue and ceramic and Sellotape and string in front of me, and that moment of



sort of expectation and anticipation of what's going to be made here. And I think that that's got a very strong commonality with an art therapy process, because we're always expecting the people we work with to make something. And of course, some people won't, most commonly people do. And when I start working with someone new they might say to me, oh, you know, how do I start, how do I begin, what do I do? And it can also feel threatening and uncertain being in the presence of an art therapist and being observed and being witnessed; and then an expectation of creating something. So, with the people I work with I'm trying to reassure them and make it known that it can be playful and can see it as experimental and just have a go, that kind of thing.

But of course, there is that moment where someone might say, oh, I don't know what to do and I don't know how to do this; as an art therapist I fundamentally trust that the majority of times they always will, in this environment with myself being able to foster a particular kind of space, they will be creative, they will make a creation.

And I had that association visiting 'Mend Piece', of that moment where there's a kind of expectation to make something and then...but not knowing. And thinking that the pieces can't be made into anything, in a sense, as in they can't go back to what they were, so there's got to be a new creation. There's something quite exciting about that moment of not knowing, but then something can be created and will be created, and will always be created. And in the exhibition space there's all the creations that people have made on the walls; so, in a way it is testimony - however someone might think at the beginning the impossibility of making something, that

there's evidence that everyone, I'm sure, will have made something.

And also the interesting aspect that we don't have to make something that is what it was, and that we can make something transformative and different.

JS: Thank you. I think that's a really pertinent reflection on the show. Another part of the instructions for 'MEND PIECE for London' of course is thinking of 'mending the world at the same time'. And I'm interested to know if you have any reflections on this wider context of mending and healing, going beyond the self to the world, as Yoko Ono phrases it.

NR: I guess I wanted to say that, and I suppose this is something that feels important when I'm talking about art therapy, and in particular the way I work as an art therapist, and perhaps classically art therapy, or therapy, might be considered as an individual endeavour. But part of my training as part of what I offer is people working together in a group, or people being part of a group process, so providing a collective space where there's some collective healing that can be done, but also spaces where there can be an active movement to engaging with what is happening in the world or within one's own societies such as social justice or climate crisis, or racial justice, and providing spaces where people would actively be doing that kind of exploration as well as just this individual healing.

And I think that that does relate to this piece, or the intention behind the piece. So I guess that that is certainly my hope when I offer therapy, that it isn't just for oneself, that it is about in relation to oneself, in relation to others, and then in relation to wider connections with others, and then society beyond that.

So there is some commonality in that as well of what we can do when we're together, beyond what we can do with just individuals; so having these collective spaces.

JS: And so my final question is actually about colour, because the colour white is very prominent in the work. And I was curious whether or not colour theory comes into your work, especially with the kind of mindfulness aspect as well.

NR: So I've had quite a strong association with that moment where there would be also a white piece of paper in front of a client in that beginning. And I think that that does relate to mindfulness. And I know that one of the classical images in mindfulness meditation is 'a sky-like nature of mind'; it's an image that we use when we're teaching, and it's about seeing the mind. And again mind is a concept, and however one might relate to mind; but it's a teaching tool as an image that we are, we can be like the sky, and that thoughts can be seen as floating through the mind.

And what we're doing in mindfulness meditation practice is knowing that there is the skylight nature of mind, and then there's also thoughts; and we're learning how we might relate to those thoughts. So that's not to dismiss thoughts, that's not to say that they shouldn't be there, but it's more an enquiry into how we relate to those thoughts. It might be how we're kinder to those thoughts, and it might be that if we are practising mindfulness meditation with consistency and regularly, that sometimes those thoughts dissipate.

So a bit like a stormy weather, or, like, out of my window there's actually lots of clouds out of my window today, with a little bit of blue. So the sense is that through practising mindfulness meditation there may be less

clouds; also being in touch with something more vast and more spacious. And that's, for me, there's something about that white quality, the white space, that also connects with mindfulness. So the white as in space, as in something more spacious than what we might otherwise fill with thoughts. So more how we relate to thoughts, how thoughts may dissipate.

I think it also relates to one of the reasons why I offer mindfulness in my sessions, and there's lots of reasons. And one of them could be mindfulness just for its wellbeing qualities, but also when mindfulness is combined with something creative it is that moment of pause. So in mindfulness we're actively making a choice to pause. So for instance, if I've seen someone who's just come from their work day and they've been checking emails and having commitments, and then I'm saying, oh, let's pause here, let's just be. And then there's guidance to be in the body, notice what feelings are there, notice what kind of mind state there is; and then maybe coming to an object of attention, like breath or body, to stabilize the awareness. So there's always a space for that.

And like you're saying, it's that space that can then allow for a deeper creative expression to be there. So it is through creating some space and maybe through being in touch in that kind of way that then allows for an expression. And that expression might have a different kind of essence and quality than if it's come from a different mind state.

JS: Thank you, Nicky, it's been really wonderful to speak with you, and I think you've given some really interesting reflections on the show, which will I'm sure help people connect with that work, and hopefully when they're mending they'll be thinking mindfully and considering

some of these ideas as well. So we really appreciate you joining us today.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at [www.whitechapelgallery.org](http://www.whitechapelgallery.org), on the Bloomberg Connects app, as well as iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher and SoundCloud. Don't forget to book your visit to the exhibition 'Yoko Ono: MEND PIECE for London' from the 25th of August 2021 until the 2nd of January 2022. Bye for now.

Transcribed by 1<sup>st</sup> Class Secretarial Services.