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Flux Buddhism: How Yoko Ono's Fluxus Era Art Shows The Connection Between Her Buddhist
Upbringing And Her Art

The Fluxus art movement was an art movement which focused more on the process of creating, rather than the result of the final product. Yoko Ono is undoubtedly one of the most well-known artists of the movement. Ono's art can be used to demonstrate and exemplify connections between art and the ideas of Buddhism. Buddhism focuses on karma and reincarnation. Because of this focus, Fluxus art can channel Buddhist ideas through the artistic process.

Yoko Ono, now known as the wife of the late Beatle John Lennon, or even infamously as "the death of the Beatles", was famous in her own regards prior to her connection with her husband. Yoko Ono was born in Japan and had deep familial ties within the Buddhist religion. Her great-grandfather, "Atsushi Saisho, who traced his ancestry to a ninth-century religious leader, also called Saisho, whose talents caught the attention of the emperor. With cash from the royal treasury, Saisho founded a new, and controversial, Buddhist sect, 'Tendai Lotus', in 807. After establishing a monastery, he was to be embroiled in ecclesiastical politics until his demise fifteen years later, loaded with all manner of honours. Chief among these was the title of Daishi – 'Great Teacher' – particularly as Saisho was the first priest in Japan to be thus known." (Clayson, 11) Ono was raised in Japan where one of the most dominant religious forces is Buddhism.

Buddhism is an ancient religion. To be more precise, Buddhism is over 500 years older than Christianity. Buddhism is based on concepts of nature. The teachings of Buddha focus in understanding one's inner-self, as well as how the self relates to its surroundings. The words of Buddha, the *Dhamma*, consists of three main components, Doctrine, *Pariyatti*, Practice, *Patipatti* and Realization, *Pativedha*. The Doctrine, also known as *Tipitaka*, or Three Baskets, is hailed as the main scripture for the Buddhist religion, comparable to the Christian Bible. (VRI) Interestingly, the *Tipitaka* is actually about 11 times *longer* than the Bible. (VRI)

As with Christianity and other religions, Buddhism too has different denominations. Regardless of the more trivial differences, the basic concepts are the same Buddhism is based on suffering, suffering for a cause, and the cessation of suffering and the path to enlightenment or , *Nirvana*. There is no specific deity that is worshipped in Buddhism, but rather existence itself and the beauty of uncertainty and personal growth. According to Buddhist teachings, "The Four Noble Truths comprise the essence of Buddha's teachings, though they leave much left unexplained. They are the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering." (VRI) It is only at the end of this journey that one may reach true enlightenment or *Nirvana*.

Nirvana is a state of being that is regarded as the highest form in Buddhist religion. In order to reach Nirvana, one must identify, understand, and define the relief of suffering. In otherwords, the only way to achieve Nirvana is to understand the Four Noble Truths. (VRI)

Buddhism is focused heavily on cyclical processes. As seen with the Four Noble Truths, the religion also harnesses concepts of karma and reincarnation. Reincarnation is the after-life system for the Buddhist faiths. It is believed that upon expiration of the physical form, a persons inner spirit is released and sent into the world to manifest within a new body. Karma is a

philosophy that, in colloquial terms, states that the energy that is put into the universe is the same energy that is received from it. These concepts mindfulness and awareness, as they relate to Buddhism are also very prominent in the works of Yoko Ono as well as the works of other artists of the Fluxus art movement.

The fluxus art movement was an art movement born from the desire to go against traditional artistic normalcies. The dada art movement is hailed as the predecessor or “father” for the Fluxus movement as both carry themes of free flowing creation. In fact, the name Fluxus is derived from latin and means flowing. The movement itself is quite diverse and nearly impossible to define as the definition and manifestation of said art movement vary greatly from artist to artist. According to the book *Fluxus Experience*, “Since Fluxus artists never seem to agree on anything, Fluxus has become ‘a pain in art’s ass,’ in the words of Fluxus artist Ben Vautier. Neither the style nor the substance or significance of what they do produces consensus among the artists. Production ranges from minimal performances, called Events, to full-scale operas, and from graphics and boxed multiples called Fluxkits to paintings on canvas. The artists come from almost every industrialized nation, they span several generations, and many even dislike each other. Accurately portraying Fluxus therefore requires thinking about art in a way that forgoes the normally definitive terms of style, medium, and political sensibility. As the historian Owen Smith puts it, ‘For anyone seeking to learn...about the historical nature of Fluxus and its conceptual framework it might more readily seem to be just plain frustrating rather than radical.’” (Higgins)

Yoko Ono found her way into the artworld and made a name for herself during the fluxus movement. After moving to New York from Japan, the young Ono began to explore art as she studied at Sarah Lawrence College. (Clayson) Onos early works were instructional cards

which gave viewer directions for creating. These performances could be completed by anyone, anywhere. The Fluxus movement put a heavy emphasis on blending the strict line between life and “high art”. Ono's instructional works were universal in nature and gave great support for this aspect of Fluxism. Arguably Ono's most famous work is titled *Cut Piece*, which is actually a performance piece. (Ono)

Cut Piece is hailed as a feminist masterpiece, despite Ono never having described the work as such. This work has been performed by numerous artists after Ono. For the performance, Ono sat centre stage in front of an audience. She instructed the audience to come up one by one and cut a piece of her clothing to take with them. After instructing the audience, she sat in the *seiza* position with a pair of scissors in front of her. She sat still and silent for the duration of the performance. (Ono) Ono gave the power of creation, or destruction in this particular instance, to her audience. Ono was not necessarily the artist at that point but rather the canvas for her audience, the artists. The way that Ono composed this performance as well as her other works, is very indicative of her Buddhist upbringing.

Whether intentional or not the Fluxus art movement has very strong parallels to Buddhism. Ono's work is a fantastic depiction of the connections between Flux art and Buddhism.

Ono's instruction cards often showcase themes of nature and spontaneity. Yoko Ono's book *Grapefruit* is a collection of these instructional cards. One piece that is a fantastic example of Buddhism is *PAINTING FOR THE WIND* (Summer 1961).

The instructions for Yoko Ono's *PAINTING FOR THE WIND* are as follows:

PAINTING FOR THE WIND

Cut a hole in a bag filled with seeds
of any kind and place the bag
where there is wind.

1961 summer (Ono)

This work of art showcases the Buddhist ideals as well as the basis for the Fluxus movement.

As this instructional card can be performed by anyone, it is a great example of Fluxus art. Fluxus art focused on life as art, rather than a specific composition of materials. Fluxism combated elitist art culture by transferring the artistic process from an "artist" and into the hands of "average" people. This piece has an infinite amount of variations which is a great way to demonstrate Buddhism. Every aspect of this piece is subject to differences.

The piece starts out by asking the artist to "cut a hole in a bag". (Ono) This is open to tonnes of variation. Firstly, what is to be used to cut the bag? Scissors, knives, or even swords can be used to cut a bag open. Secondly, how big is the hole supposed to be? It is not clearly stated how big the hole is, or even how big, or what material the bag is made of. This can further be explored as the philosophical debate as to what a hole is. (Hughes) The next aspect of this piece from *Grapefruit* that is subject to variability is the bag of seeds itself. (Ono) The size of this bag is not specified. The type of seeds to be used for *PAINTING FOR THE WIND* are not explicitly stated either. Interestingly, the amount of seeds is not specified either. What is described in the piece, however, is the use of seeds not seed. Therefore, there MUST be at least

two seeds in the bag to abide by this piece's instructions. The prompt also asks the artist to place this seed bag where there is wind. But again, what does that mean? Wind can be anywhere. The wind can be natural or human-made. The wind can be detectable in the moment or not. As common with fluxus and Buddhism, these minute differences will separate each performance, and are completely random as the variations are limitless. What is particularly great about this specific piece is the integration of nature. Nature is more or less unpredictable. While trend and patterns are notable, no one person (this is variant based on religion) has control of the weather. Much in buddhist fashion, the artist is to be subservient to any and all variations and accept changes as they happen. It is up to society to respect these differences and accept that so long as the basics are followed, every performance of this is valid and accurate.

The aforementioned work by Yoko Ono *Cut Piece* is yet another great example of Buddhism in Fluxus. Once again, Ono places the power of control in the hands of her audience. By this transferral of power, Ono is given in to whatever she is subjected to by external forces, forces out of her control. This is a direct parallel to the Buddhist concepts of suffering. As Ono allowed people to cut away at her clothing, the very barrier between herself and nudity, she allows herself to be a publicly displayed victim of humility. Despite being cast in such a vulnerable light, Ono maintains a strong state of calmness, dignity, and respect. (Ono) During her performance, Ono sat in a position known as *seiza*. (Ono) This way of sitting is a traditional position in Japan where one's legs are placed underneath one's own body so that the knees are on the floor and the legs act as a seat. This way of sitting is not only polite, but is considered respectful and humbling. This reference to Ono's upbringing showcases her personal understanding of Buddhism. (Ono) As Ono sat on stage, allowing strangers to destroy her clothing and strip her bare, Ono maintained a high level of poise. Her ability to ignore the fear of and the

invasiveness of the audience showcases the meditative properties of her work. Despite Ono untimely having control of the situation, she chose to eave herself vulnerable to the situation.

Some of Ono's works also play into the concept of unity. Just as Buddhist speak of one thing passing into another, Ono' sworks are able to be fluid and free in form. Some of these more group-effort pieces have an aftershock effect. A famous quote from Buddha Siddharta Guatama Shakyamuni explains that, "It is like a lighted torch whose flame can be distributed to ever so many other torches which people may bring along; and therewith they will cook food and dispel darkness, while the original torch itself remains burning ever the same. It is even so with the bliss of the Way." (Pannyavaro) This is similar to how some of Ono's works manifest. Some examples of this type of "passable" art are her CONVERSATION PIECE[S] (1962 summer and 1963 summer). The first CONVERSATION PIECE tells the artist:

CONVERSATION PIECE

Bandage any part of your body.

If people ask about it, make a story
and tell.

If people do not ask about it, draw
attention to it and tell.

If people forget about it, remind
them of it and keep telling.

Do not talk about anything else.

1962 summer (Ono)

Similarly is the unofficial sequel to this piece also called CONVERSATION PIECE. The second CONVERSATION PIECE says:

CONVERSATION PIECE

Talk about the death of an imaginary person.

If somebody is interested, bring out

A black framed photograph of the deceased and show.

If friends invite you, excuse yourself by explaining about the death of the person.

1963 summer (Ono)

These pieces can have very great impacts on others. As the artist is instructed to tell a lie, this fabricated story can be carried on to others. Word travels fast, and these synthesised unfortunate events would be met with words of love, kindness, and condolences, all for something, that never even happened. Yet, this is the beauty of these works. It takes nothing away from others to show the artist sympathy and compassion. Despite this being viewed as potentially sick or twisted, the artist is creating history from imagination; history that will be carried on from person to person, changing in form much like life according to the teachings of Buddhism.

As with buddhism, Onos works are not a final product to be shown. It is not about the end, but more so the journey taken. Ono's works are to be performed. Her instructional cards are as plain and simple as can be. The original iteration of *Grapefruit* was nothing more than simple

text on plain paper. (Ono) The beauty in these works is only seen as it is brought to fruition by the reader, the creating artist. Ono's works are repeatable. EACH time a work is reincarnated, it may be similar to the first, but it can never be the *same*.

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