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Yoko Ono, "In Another Country," *Artforum*, Summer 2009

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In Another Country

Among the most poignant artworks made by Yoko Ono during her fifty-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 Tiravanija, 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. An excerpt from the conversation appears below. For the rest, pick up the Summer issue of *Artforum*.



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

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJIA: 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 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.

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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,