

CHAMBERS STREET LOFT SERIES

December 1960–June 1961

In December 1960, Yoko Ono rented a loft on the top floor of a building located at 112 Chambers Street, in downtown Manhattan. She intended to use the space as a studio but also envisioned it as a place to present new music and ideas, a place unlike any other in the contemporary performance scene dominated by Midtown concert halls. Ono borrowed a baby grand piano from a friend and created makeshift furniture with discarded crates, transforming the low-ceilinged, gray-paneled loft into a vibrant environment. Over the course of six months, Ono and composer La Monte Young presented numerous events by artists, musicians, dancers, and composers, the programs for which are exhibited here. Several works combined music, visual art, and performance, blurring the distinctions between mediums. On any given evening there were as many as two hundred attendees, including art-world figures such as John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Peggy Guggenheim, Isamu Noguchi, George Maciunas, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg.

 602 English only

SŌGETSU ART CENTER, TOKYO

May 1962

Ono returned to Japan in early 1962 and remained for over two years. Her first concert and exhibition in Tokyo, at the Sōgetsu Art Center in May 1962, upended the expectations of the audience by encouraging them to participate in new and radical ways. She displayed a poem that viewers could touch (*Touch Poem #5*) (on view in the first gallery of this exhibition) and Instructions for Paintings (handwritten texts without images) that viewers had to create in their imaginations (presented in this gallery). The concert consisted of a combination of new and older works, performed by Ono and a group of fellow artists and musicians. The evening closed with *Audience Piece to La Monte*, in which the performers formed a line across the stage, and each chose a different audience member to watch. As soon as that audience member broke eye contact, the performer redirected his or her attention to a new person. By inverting the direction of the gaze, Ono broke down traditional boundaries between performer and audience.

BAG PIECE

1964

In a 1966 text about *Bag Piece*, Ono wrote, “After the curtain has gone up (or if there is no curtain, at a designated time after the announcer announced the piece) two performers walk onto the stage. Performers may be two males, two females, or a mixed couple. Performers carry a bag large enough for both to get inside of. Bag made of non-transparent material. Both performers get inside of bag. Both remove all clothing while inside of bag. Both put all clothing back on. They come out of bag. They exit with bag from stage.” Ono performed *Bag Piece* publicly for the first time in Kyoto in July 1964, in the same concert in which she premiered *Cut Piece*. The piece can be performed in various ways; some participants disrobe, while others lie motionless inside the bag. The idea for the work grew out of Ono’s own shyness as a young woman. “I didn’t know how to explain to people how shy I was,” the artist recounts. “When people visited I wanted to be in a big sort of box with little holes where nobody could see me, but I could see through the holes. So later, that developed into my *Bag Piece* where you can be inside, and see outside, but they can’t see you.”

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TOKYO/NEW YORK

1963–1966

Grapefruit is a self-published artist's book that comprises instructions Ono wrote between 1953 and 1964. She first presented instruction-based artwork during her Chambers Street Loft Series in 1960–61. In the years that followed, Ono created works that continued to distance her concepts from their physical manifestations, eventually culminating in *Grapefruit* in 1964. The grapefruit, a citrus hybrid, operates as a metaphor for Ono's incorporation of both Eastern and Western philosophies in her work. Between 1963 and 1966, Ono lived in both Tokyo and New York, serving as a critical bridge within the international avant-garde.

A number of works in this gallery capture Ono's close relationships with other artists, namely George Maciunas and John Cage. Maciunas organized Ono's first solo exhibition in 1961, and Ono was actively involved with him in the formation of Fluxus, later participating in Fluxus performances and events. Ono met Cage when she first moved to New York in the mid-1950s. Although she at times distanced herself from his ideas, they remained friends and she performed during his 1962 Japanese tour.



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LONDON

1966–1969

Since the beginning of the 1960s, Ono had encouraged viewers to realize her artworks, either through their direct participation or in their imaginations, and she continued to develop this strategy in her solo exhibition at Indica Gallery, London, in 1966. Many of the works from that exhibition are on view in this gallery.

Add Color Painting (1961/1966) and *Painting to Hammer a Nail* (1961/1966) required the viewer's intervention, whereas *Apple* (1966) (on view at the entrance to the exhibition) comprises a solitary fruit, devoid of the artist's hand beyond its placement on a Plexiglas pedestal affixed with a brass plaque. The night before the show opened, John Lennon stopped by the gallery. Moved by Ono and her artistic concepts, he was the first person to sign the exhibition guest book, including his middle name, Winston, and his home address. In the years that followed, Ono worked in close collaboration with Lennon, producing films, initiating global peace campaigns, and launching the Plastic Ono Band.

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TO SEE THE SKY

2015

This gallery showcases works inspired by the sky, including *To See the Sky*, a new work created for this exhibition.

The sky is a central and recurring subject in Ono's work. Her fascination with it dates back to her childhood memories of being displaced from Tokyo during World War II and finding safety in the countryside. "That's when I fell in love with the sky," remembers Ono. "Even when everything was falling apart around me, the sky was always there for me. . . . I can never give up on life as long as the sky is there." Ono's favorite feature of her Chambers Street loft was its skylight because it created the feeling of being "more connected to the sky than to the city outside." The ever-changing permanence of the sky—an element of nature that varies according to time and place yet is shared by everyone, everywhere—has inspired Ono's art making since the beginning of her career.

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PLASTIC ONO BAND

est. c. 1968–1969

Around 1968, Ono decided to create a band “that would never exist . . . that didn’t have a set number of members . . . that could accommodate anyone who wanted to play with it.” The name derived from a small three-dimensional work—composed primarily of transparent plastic objects—that John Lennon had made in response to Ono’s idea. The original is now lost, but the work has been reimaged by Ono for this exhibition. Although conceptually Plastic Ono Band had no members, in practice it had a flexible lineup. For a performance at the Toronto Rock and Roll Revival festival in 1969, the band consisted of Ono, Lennon, Eric Clapton, Klaus Voormann, and Alan White. During this session—which produced the band’s first live recording—Ono performed her *Bag Piece* (1964), entering a white bag in the middle of the stage. Other performances likewise incorporated Ono’s earlier works or introduced new artistic pursuits. The band continued releasing records through the mid-1970s. In 2009, Ono revived Plastic Ono Band with her son, Sean Lennon.

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AG GALLERY, NEW YORK

July 1961

Although Ono presented her works during the Chambers Street Loft Series, she did not have her first solo exhibition until summer 1961, at the AG Gallery on New York's Upper East Side. George Maciunas, an architect, designer, and codirector of the gallery, invited Ono to do a show after attending events at her Chambers Street loft. Ono created the paintings in the exhibition from a single roll of canvas to which she applied washes of Japanese sumi ink and performed other interventions. These works, which became known as "instruction paintings," were physical manifestations of Ono's own instructions. She communicated the instructions verbally or, at times, on handwritten cards, requesting that viewers personally engage with the works in order to complete their creation, thus resulting in unforeseeable outcomes.

In order to convey a sense of the lost originals, The Museum of Modern Art, together with Ono, undertook an extensive study of the materials, techniques, and display strategies used in her early works, and made the paintings on view here. These works represent one of the ways Ono's instructions can be realized.



View of Paintings & Drawings by Yoko Ono, AG Gallery, New York, July 1961. Photograph by George Maciunas. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, 2008. © George Maciunas. Used by permission.