

Yoko Ono: More than the widow Lennon, a great artist

I first encountered Yoko Ono's work at a big exhibition at the Riverside Gallery in London. It was some time in the late 1980s, when I was at art college. I liked her work immediately, because it was beyond any genre or categories I had seen before.

Everything in the exhibition felt disparate; nothing seemed to connect it esthetically. And yet as you looked closer, you realized there were connections, slight ones: everything was linked by intangible ideas.

At that time I had been studying sculpture but was thinking about photography and film, and wondering whether they were part of the art world. And here was someone who seemed to be answering my questions — or beginning to, at least.

The piece of work that really stood out in that exhibition (and in fact still does) was a film called *Bottoms*. Ono brought together her New York friends, artists and musicians, and filmed their naked bums as they walked on the spot.

It's a really strong image, one in which you immediately recognize references to Eadweard Muybridge,

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to early photography and film-making. Perhaps the most striking thing about it, though, is its simplicity: here is something that you see every day in the street — but unclothed.

The other great work that I saw there was a film called *Fly*. It shows a woman lying so still she looks almost comatose. The only movement is that of a fly, which we follow as it lands on different parts of her body.

The film is so slight, and yet there is something in the stillness of her body, the gentle movement of this fly, that seems sensual, even erotic. Ono has described this as an autobiographical piece — and she has chosen a remarkably delicate way in which to express herself.

To look at Ono's work is to look at an artist who isn't afraid. Her art makes you think: she can do anything. That has been Ono's greatest influence on me. She gave me a sense of freedom — made me see

that the usual restrictions, of being a painter or a sculptor, were gone.

She is similar to Bruce Nauman, who also makes you feel that there is no area that you can't go into.

Art, you realize, is about ideas — not necessarily about the way you project the idea, more about how you follow it into whatever medium possible.

It has been said before

that she is very much an artist's artist, and it's true — artists can really recognize her thought process, see the ways in which ideas bounce from one thing to another. Artists can respect that. Other people don't find her so accessible, but perhaps that's because they can't get past her relationship with her husband.

John Lennon said of her that she is the most famous unknown artist. Everyone knows her name, but no one knows what she does.

There is a lot of stigma attached to her enigma: it puts a barrier in front of her that a lot of people won't break through. But I think her work influences more people than anyone realizes.

Her films must have influenced Andy Warhol, who is one of my own influences, so she has informed some of the way I work through him. And I certainly sense her work in that of my contemporaries — Sarah Lucas, for instance, or Gavin Turk.

Anyone who uses film will be aware of filmmakers like Ono, Warhol and Stan Brackage, who were among the first people to use film for art. At that time film was traditionally narrative;



AP/Itsuyo Inoue

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they were the people who allowed it to go to the next level.

Another difficulty with Ono's work is one shared by the Fluxus movement, of which she is a part. A lot of their work was really visceral: it comprised performance, music, dance, film, pamphlets and posters. And a lot of it doesn't exist any more. Fluxus wasn't dedicated to specifics, but to the intangible.

One of the things Ono said was that she didn't like anything to be final; that end to something always made her nervous. So her art was always about the journey rather than the end product.

I don't know how much of it still exists, outside of people's memories, or in books. Some of what does exist is so slight, people don't know what to make of it. One particularly lovely piece, called *Painting to Let the Evening Light Go Through*, is just a piece of glass that hangs in a window. It's beautiful — but how do you categorize something like that?

The point with Ono is that her work sits in its own world and has its own classification — hence, maybe, her relative obscurity as an

artist. Last year I was at a new clubnight in London called Nag Nag Nag, where Ono did a performance.

She came in, sang for five minutes and walked off. It was like nothing I had ever heard before. It was incredible, and an event unlikely to be repeated. The room was full of hip twentysomethings; Ono was 70, and yet she was obviously more extreme than anyone else there. You could see how she might now influence a whole new generation.

Perhaps what's most remarkable about Ono is that her ideas are based on the simplest, most banal, everyday things. But when she focuses on them, she makes you see the world differently. A fly flitting about a woman's body isn't an irritation: it can be the most beautiful thing in the world.

Yoko Ono: Odyssey of a Cockroach is at 14 Wharf Road, London, from Feb. 5. Details: +44-20-7930 3647.
