

## YOKO ONO

### THE RIVERBED



On an unsettlingly warm February's day in Toronto, a hodgepodge of geriatrics, hipsters and curious children gathered at a table at the Gardiner Museum. Taking their cues from the captions on the walls, they fumbled as they tried to join ceramic shards using glue, paper cement, tape and twine. The sound of stones being knocked over further punctuated the white-cube gravitas, barely raising the eyebrows of the bored-to-tears assistants ambling around the room. Resembling and feeling like an elementary school classroom, it's difficult to imagine this as the setting of a serious exhibition, let alone a major Toronto show—but then again, perhaps not, when one considers the artist behind it.

Yoko Ono's "The Riverbed" enjoyed its premiere in New York in 2015 before journeying north of the border in February. The show featured three works by the conceptual artist and exponent of the radical Fluxus movement. Known for favoring process over product—as in her 1964 book *Grapefruit*, which comprises a list of bizarre instructions, including one to "imagine a thousand suns in the sky before making a tuna sandwich," and installation *Wish Tree* (1996), for which she asked participants to pen their wishes on a piece of paper and tie them to a tree—there was very little in terms of the exhibits that were made solely by Ono herself. Instead, visitors were asked to fill in the spaces by activating the artist's prompts. In this sense, it's often difficult to critique the end product of Ono's prescriptions, as it's very much what each individual wants to make of it.

Upon entering the main exhibition space, one immediately encounters *Stone Piece* (2015). A line of stones divided one portion of the room in half. Written on the rocks' smooth surfaces were words such as "wish" and "dream." Exemplifying how Ono has drawn from Zen philosophies over the course of her artistic career, visitors were asked to pick the objects up in an act of meditation and self-healing. "Choose a stone and hold it until all your anger and sadness have been let go," read the didactic label.

Nearby, visitors had to bend under a sprawling web of strings in order to access the partly walled-off room that housed *Line Piece* (2015). "Take me to the farthest place in our planet by extending the line," Ono instructs in one corner of the space. Visitors were offered pencils and little notebooks to draw lines in for one possible interpretation of the text. Elsewhere, one could also hammer nails into the walls and connect them via strings. Ono's idea was that the installation would evolve and transform over the course of the exhibition into an intricate matrix.

While both *Stone Piece* and *Line Piece* were originally made for the New York iterations of the show, the third work—*Mend Piece*—dates back to 1966. Visitors were encouraged to connect ceramic slabs that had been smashed to pieces with an array of tools and later display their creations to future audiences on rows of shelves. Bringing together *Stone Piece*'s aims of sparking reflection and catharsis, and the underscoring of unity in *Line Piece*, the work serves as a fitting denouement to the experience (although there's no prescribed sequence for how the pieces are to be encountered).

While the sentiments expressed in "The Riverbed" are certainly noble and valuable, one is left wondering as to the practicality and significance of the artist's instructions in the real world. For over half a century, Ono has, through her art, encouraged audiences to imagine better days and make wishes for the future; but is it enough to simply hope and dream? More often than not, the impracticalities of the works are eclipsed by mere sensations of humanitarianism and optimism, and the thrill of interacting with a figure like Ono. In this sense, the exhibition imparts the feeling of having wished for world peace while blowing out birthday candles—an empty gesture repeated for the sake of keeping up appearances.

JOOBIN BEKHRAD

\*Visit our Digital Library at [library.artasiapacific.com](http://library.artasiapacific.com) for more articles on Yoko Ono.

#### Opposite page

Installation view of "Take My Breath Away," at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2018.  
Photo by David Heald.  
Courtesy the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

#### This page

**YOKO ONO**  
*Mend Piece*  
1966/2015  
Ceramic, glue, tape, paper, cement, scissors and twine, dimensions variable.  
Installation view of "The Riverbed" at Galerie Lelong, New York, 2015–16.  
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