

Yoko Ono: *Fly*

Center for Contemporary Art, September 18 - October 26, 2008

Dorota Kozinska

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YOKO ONO

FLY

By Dorota Kozinska

SHE MAY BE CALLED A "POOR NEGLECTED SUPERSTAR" BY THE MERCILESS BRITISH PRESS, BUT IN POLAND, YOKO ONO IS THE TALK OF THE TOWN.



The town in question is Warsaw, where the controversial avant-garde artist organized and curated a mini retrospective of her most famous works. Transforming the Centre for Contemporary Art, housed in the picturesque, historical 16th century Ujazdowski Castle, into a giant interactive playground, she clearly continued her love affair with the Polish public.

She was effusive in her response to the journalists welcoming her to the city: "The air in Warsaw is very intimate and close to me. I feel like I am coming back to somewhere [...] that I have forgotten about."

Ono was referring to her two previous visits to the Polish capital – the first in 1986, when, as part of her goodwill *Starpeace* tour, she held a concert at Torwar; the second in 1993, when she held her first exhibit at the Centre for Contemporary Art (CSW).

She thus explained her affinity for Poland: "*The reason I feel so close to Warsaw and Poland is because I also come from a small country and these small countries are always between big countries and how we survive is an incredible thing.*"

The latest exhibit, *Fly*, is a result of collaboration between the Astrup Fearnley Modern Art Museum in Oslo, Norway and CSW.

Gunnar B. Kvaran, director of the Oslo museum, described the exhibit as mainly text-based, made up of pieces that were created into art in the exhibition space itself. Some of them date back to the 1950s, covering Ono's career until now, and "include an element of participation from the viewer."

Fly is a cumulative exhibition, showing various works in different media from the entirety of Ono's career as a multi-media artist. Pieces shown included the eponymous *Fly*, 1970 (a 25 minute film); *Blue Room*, 1966; *Ex It*, 1997; *Amaze*, 1971; *Wish Tree*, 1997; *Memory Painting*, 2008; and a piece specially mounted for Warsaw called *Telephone for Warsaw*, 2008.

"When I selected the works, I was thinking about the fear, pain and suffering you went through during the war. I myself was in Japan during the Second World War as a young girl and remember there was incredible poverty, pain... but such pain gives incredible wisdom," Ono told the press.

The exhibition is based on her *Instruction* works, which focus on the conceptual principles behind the art work, the participation of spectators in its production and material realization, the ethereality and de-sanctification of the art object, while at the same time, these works, with their profound social and political references, express the critical vision of the artist herself.

"I've never tried to shock people," she said during the opening press conference, adding with a delicate laugh, "I am always shocked when they're shocked."

The main element of Ono's art is, and always has been, viewer participation. Her decision to create an artwork in flux, rather than as a static object beyond time, to a complete deconstruction of the creative process as a work of art in itself, was a radical move indeed. She presented works that were to a large degree if not entirely constructed, or completed, by the viewer, as well as works that were deconstructed and destroyed by the same means of artistic expression.

It was her art that seduced John Lennon before he encountered the woman herself. It may have been during his visit to her show at a London gallery in 1966 – facts and myth go hand in hand in the John and Yoko saga – and it may have been her black dress performance, in which Ono sat on an empty white stage clad in black, and viewers were given little scissors and invited to cut off bits of her dress, until she remained naked.

The almost unbearable subtlety of this performance, and its aesthetic simplicity are a trademark of this incredible, and highly undervalued artist.

In her seminal video *Fly*, two insects hover over the prostrate body of a naked, motionless woman. Several screens focus on different angles, there is no sound, and one is soon mesmerized by the movement

of the fly, as it alights on a pink nipple or a lip, or dances just inches above an undulating belly.

As to the *Instruction* series, they included the famous *Wish Tree* where viewers can write their wish on a piece of paper and hang it up in the branches. All wishes are then gathered and brought to Iceland to *Imagine Peace Tower*, which Ono built in order to commemorate John Lennon.

There were empty rooms inviting visitors to write on the walls, and other empty rooms where the artist has written messages in tiny lettering on each wall. One read: "This room moves at the same speed as the clouds."

There was a room with broken china, smashed by the artist during the press conference, and now handed over to the imagination of the visitors, who, equipped with white masking tape, could set to create their own work of art from the broken shards.

And then there was, *Ex It*, a room filled with tiny wooden coffins, from the heads of which sprung live saplings. The sound of birds was piped into the space and the bright lighting rendered the scene profoundly disturbing.

Its message sounded loud and clear, and there was very little chatter among the visiting public.

For a "witch", as she is so often unkindly called, Ono can certainly create some celestial and highly moving artistic experiences. At 75, she is as fresh and contemporary as ever, and we can only envy the Polish public for having had the opportunity to encounter this fascinating artist and her art.

But with 2009 marking the 40th anniversary of Lennon and Ono's infamous bed-in at Montreal's Queen Elizabeth Hotel, we just might get lucky. □

EXHIBITION

YOKO ONO
FLY

Center for Contemporary Art
Ujazdowski Castle
Warsaw, Poland

September 18 – October 26, 2008