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INSTRUCTING, CONSTRUCTING, DECONSTRUCTING:
THE EMBODIED AND DISEMBODIED
PERFORMANCES OF YOKO ONO

Vera Mackie

Modernism, Postmodernism and the Avant-Garde

Modernism has been described as ‘either a time-bound or a genre-bound art form.’¹ In generic terms, modernist art has been described as ‘experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contain[ing] elements of decreation as well as creation, and tend[ing] to associate notions of the artist’s freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form ...’² Modernist art forms have further been described as those which are ‘... aesthetically radical, contain striking technical innovation, emphasize spatial or “fugal” as opposed to chronological form, tend towards ironic modes, and involve a certain “dehumanization” of art.’³ Modernist art deploys the techniques of montage, collage, mixed-media assemblages, genre-crossing, generic indeterminacy, formalism, anti-realism and fragmentation. One could also, however, ask whether modernism is rather a matter of reading strategies. The same work might, at different times, be read as modernist or postmodernist.⁴ New works are constantly being claimed for the ‘modernist’ canon.⁵

¹ Peter Childs, *Modernism*, London: Routledge, 2008 [2000], p. 2

² Childs, *Modernism*, p. 2.

³ Malcolm Bradbury, in Peter Childs and Roger Fowler (eds) *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, London: Routledge, 2005,

⁴ Fredric Jameson, ‘Afterword’, in Stephen Ross, (ed.) *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 250–251.

⁵ For recent rethinking of modernism in Japan, see William Gardner, *Advertising Tower: Japanese Modernism and Modernity in the 1930s*, Cambridge: Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006) Aaron Gerow, *A Page of Madness: Cinema and Modernity in 1920s Japan* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies/University of Michigan, 2008; Thomas Lamarre, *Shadows on the Screen: Tanizaki Jun’ichirō on Cinema and ‘Oriental’ Aesthetics*, Ann Arbor: Centre for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2005; Seiji M. Lippit, *Topographies of Japanese Modernism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Jackie Menzies (ed.) *Modern Boy Modern Girl: Modernity In Japanese Art 1910-1935*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1998; Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic, Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; Elise Tipton and John Clark (eds) *Being Modern*

If we attempt to identify the timeframe of modernism, most would identify the period between the two world wars as the peak of modernist culture. The question of the 'end' of modernism is controversial, as is the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. We could also ask whether modernism has different temporalities in different localities.⁶ Is the Second World War a point of rupture, or are artistic developments autonomous from political and social developments? Rather than positing a decisive break in 1945, many would rather see the 1960s as a time when modernist and postmodernist cultural forms co-existed.⁷ If modernist art forms are mainly identified according to time frame rather than particular generic features, however, there is also the danger of circularity.

There has also been a shift in the connotations of the term 'modernism' from the early twentieth century to the present. 'Modernism' originally referred to a style which was new and different from what had come before. A century later, the term is now largely historical, referring to particular artistic styles of the past. A similar point could be made about the term 'avant-garde', which originally referred to art which was at the cutting edge of new trends, in a meaning which was borrowed from military terminology.⁸ While the term avant-garde can still be used in that meaning, it is now often used, rather, to refer to particular styles of the past.

in Japan: Culture and Society from the 1910s to the 1930s, Sydney: Australian Humanities Research Foundation (AHRF) with Fine Arts Press in association with Gordon and Breach Arts International, 2000; William J. Tyler, *Modanizumu: Modernist Fiction from Japan 1913–1938*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008; Vera Mackie, 'Modernism and Colonial Modernity in Early Twentieth Century Japan', in Peter Brooker (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 996–1011.

⁶ Tyler places Japanese modernism in the years 1910 to 1940. Tyler, *Modanizumu*, p. 19.

⁷ The question of the endpoint of artistic modernism is complex for several reasons, particularly so in the case of Japan. All of the arts were subject to increasing censorship and repression in the late 1930s and the wartime period. With respect to artists who collaborated with the state-sponsored cultural organizations during the war, critics of the postwar period have often been reluctant to deal with their artistic practice, which has been seen to be tainted with militarism and ultranationalism. The careers of some individual artists, however, do cross over into the postwar period. Echoes of early twentieth century artistic practices can also be seen in the avant-garde movements of the 1960s. John Clark, 'Artistic Subjectivity in the Taisho and Early Showa Avant-Garde' in Alexandra Munroe (ed.) *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrahams, 1994), p. 50.

⁸ Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*, London: Routledge, p. 6. Some of the difficulties in applying this terminology are illustrated in Alexandra Munroe's introductory essay in *Scream Against the Sky*.

There has been much controversy about the definition of postmodernism, particularly focusing on the meanings to be attached to the prefix 'post'. Does this mean a break with modernism, a continuation of modernism, or something which is beyond modernism?⁹ Postmodern cultural forms are said to be characterized by parody, irony, pastiche, quotation and deconstruction. With respect to theories of modernity and postmodernity, some energy has been expended on a consideration of the extent to which Japanese society measures up to, or even exemplifies, an abstract standard of modernity or postmodernity. There has also been extensive discussion on the presence of postmodern features in Japanese culture. Similarly postmodernist, or, more precisely, poststructuralist strategies of reading and critique have been deployed in the reading of cultural forms in Japan.¹⁰

The Performances of Yoko Ono

In this chapter I will focus on some of Yoko Ono's artworks from the mid-1960s.¹¹ I will be asking what reading through the prism of modernism and postmodernism tells us about Ono's work. I am also interested how a focus on the body might change our reading of these works, and am intrigued by Peter Childs' comment that in modernism, there is

Although the title of the book refers to 'Japanese Art after 1945', it is clear from the introduction that the book is actually devoted to 'avant-garde art' from 1945. The term avant-garde is used by Munroe to refer to both the art of the Taishô period (1912–1926), when the term 'avant-garde art' was translated literally as '*zen'ei bijutsu*', and art of the period after the Second World War. She also refers to an exhibition in Paris which had dealt with 'Japon des avant-gardes, 1910–1970'. Alexandra Munroe, 'Scream against the Sky', in Munroe (ed.) *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, pp. 19–25.

⁹ For definitions of these terms, see: Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge New Accents, 1989; Margaret Rose, *The Post-modern and the Post-industrial: A Critical Analysis*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; Andrew John Miller, 'Fables of Progression: Modernism, Modernity, Narrative', in Stephen Ross (ed.) *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate*, London: Routledge, 2009.

¹⁰ On narratives of modernization and theories of modernity applied to Japanese society, see Gavan McCormack and Yoshio Sugimoto, eds. *Modernization and Beyond: The Japanese Trajectory*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; on postmodernity and postmodernism, see Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, eds. *Postmodernism and Japan*; Durham: Duke University Press, 1989; Johann Arnason and Yoshio Sugimoto Arnason, eds. *Japanese Encounters with Postmodernity*. London: Kegan Paul International, 1995.

¹¹ As Ono is so well-known in English-language circles as 'Yoko Ono' (that is, given name followed by family name rather than the usual Japanese-language order of family name followed by given name) I will refer to her as 'Yoko Ono' except when citing her Japanese-language publications.

a greater interest 'in the workings of the mind than of the body'.¹² Ono's art works and performance works aspire to a high degree of abstraction. This raises the question of whether there are limits to such abstraction, and whether it is possible to conceive of an abstract body.

Yoko Ono was born in 1933 near Tokyo. In her early life she moved between Japan and the USA, and she experienced rationing and evacuation during the Second World War in Japan. Ono received an education at élite educational institutions in Japan and the USA. She has been active as an artist in multiple genres over several decades in London, Tokyo, Kyoto, New York and other places. Her avant-garde performances have been able to speak to these disparate audiences in Europe, the US and Japan. Ono may thus be seen as an artist whose work crossed national boundaries, even before we had labels like 'globalization' or 'transnational'. She moved in the same artistic circles as avant-garde musicians and composers such as Ichiyanagi Toshi (b. 1933) and John Cage (1912–1992), and was connected with the Fluxus group.¹³ Alexandra Munroe associates Fluxus with an international group of conceptual artists who looked back to the Surrealists and Dada-ists of the early twentieth century: in particular Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968).¹⁴

Instructions

Ono's earliest works take the form of simple instructions. Some of these were collected in a book called *Grapefruit*, with the final instruction 'Burn this book after you have read it'.¹⁵ The most successful are abstract conceptual poems. They are paradoxical and aporetic, almost like a Zen *kōan*, which 'provokes a mental image that defies banal sense and so challenges one's imagination to see the world from a radically different perspective'.¹⁶

¹² Childs, *Modernism*, p. 8.

¹³ For biographical details of Yoko Ono, see Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, pp. 79–114.

¹⁴ Alexandra Munroe, 'A Box of Smile: Tokyo Fluxus, Conceptual Art, and the School of Metaphysics', in Munroe (ed.) *Japanese Art Since 1945: Scream against the Sky*, p. 215.

¹⁵ Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*, 1964, reprinted 1970 with an introduction by John Lennon; bilingual edition: Ono Yōko, *Gurêpufurûtsu Jûsu/ Grapefruit Juice*, Tokyo: Kôdansha, 1998, translated by Shii Hae; subsequent page references are to this bilingual edition.

¹⁶ Munroe, 'A Box of Smile', p. 220.

Skin two thousand balloons.
Fly them in the air.
*Fly Piece, Spring 1964.*¹⁷

Steal a moon on the water with a bucket.
Keep stealing until no moon is seen on the water.
*Water Piece, Spring 1964.*¹⁸

Eventually, Ono composed instructions addressed to the participants in performance 'pieces' or 'events'. The instruction pieces are similar to a musical score, and draw on John Cage's concept of the event score.¹⁹ Indeed, the earliest of such pieces include musical notation. Ono's works challenge the understanding of the artwork as something to be observed from a distanced position. Few of her artworks can take place without some action on the part of the putative spectator or audience member. In theatrical terms, this can be characterized as a shift from theatre as an 'ocular activity in which a detached, thinking and essentially passive spectator observed an active, embodied actor'²⁰ to an event which involves the embodied participation of all in the event-space. An early piece contains the following instructions.

Dance in pitch dark.
Ask audience to light a match if they want to see.
A person may not light more than one match
*Lighting Piece, 1962.*²¹

This use of lighted matches in a darkened performance space was also used by other avant-garde theatre performers in subsequent years.²² Ono herself, however, links the practice of lighting a match and watching it burn out with a period of depression in her own life.²³

¹⁷ Ono, *Gurêpufurûtsu Jûsu/ Grapefruit Juice*, p. 110.

¹⁸ Ono, *Gurêpufurûtsu Jûsu/ Grapefruit Juice*, p. 114.

¹⁹ Concannon, 'Yoko Ono's Cut Piece', p. 82. One of these scores gave its name to Alexandra Munroe's edited collection on Japanese avant-garde art from 1945. 'Voice Piece for Soprano/ Scream/ 1. Against the Wind/ 2. Against the Wall/ 3. Against the Sky/ 1961, Autumn', reproduced in Munroe (ed.) *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*, p. 19. *Voice Piece for Soprano* was recreated at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010.

²⁰ Paul Monaghan, 'Bodies and Stairs: Modern Theatrical Space and Consciousness', in Tim Mehigan (ed.) *Frameworks, Artworks, Place: The Space of Perception in the Modern World*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2008, p. 118. See also Rhee, p. 114.

²¹ See the photograph of Yoko Ono performing 'Lighting Piece' at Sôgetsu Kaikan, 24 May 1962 in Yoshimoto, *Into Performance*, p. 83.

²² See, for example, Terayama Shûji's play, *Nuhikun (Instructions to Servants)*, performed by Tenjô Sajiki.

²³ Yoshimoto, *Into Performance*, p. 79

Ono's instruction pieces can also fruitfully be compared with the stage directions of Samuel Beckett (1906–1989). Indeed, we can see some parallels between the work of Ono and Beckett in the 1950s and 1960s. Their works share a similar minimalist sensibility. However, there is a crucial difference. Beckett's artistic practice is firmly within the genre of drama, although it stretches the form to its limits.²⁴ There is a clear distinction between audience and performers, and what happens on stage is tightly scripted, choreographed and controlled. Ono's work, on the other hand, is performance art, compatible with this recent definition.

Performance art shifts the focus of artistic activity from the completion of an enduring piece ('the work') to the volatile event of a corporeal performance. This move beyond text and picture towards *eventness* and corporeality is the most distinctive feature of performance art. ... unlike traditional theatrical performances most performance art does not separate actor from stage director and script from performance. In many cases it tries to overcome the model of theatrical illusion and to return to the ritual roots of theatre ...²⁵

Or, as Ono herself has expressed it, '... I think that the worst thing is to get on stage in order to show off one's talent [*gei o miseru*]; a concert is an exchange of vibrations. And the beautiful vibration which comes from that exchange is sent out of the concert hall and into the world.'²⁶

Constructing Ritual

On her return to Tokyo from New York in 1962, Ono became involved in what have been variously called 'actions', 'events' and 'happenings'. In 1962, Ono staged a show 'Audience Piece in Works of Yoko Ono' at the Sōgetsu Hall in Tokyo, then a site for various avant-garde performances.²⁷ She also participated in a concert with John Cage and David Tudor at Sōgetsu in October 1962.²⁸

'Cut Piece', which was performed in various venues in 1964 and 1965, unfolds according to the following instructions:

²⁴ On Beckett, see Colin Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 112–142.

²⁵ Bernhard Giesen, 'Performance Art', in Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen and Jason L. Mast (eds) *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 315.

²⁶ Ono Yōko, *Tada no Atashi*, Tokyo: Kōdansha Bunko, 1990 [1984], pp. 22–23. My translation.

²⁷ Ono, *Tada no Atashi*, pp. 28–29.

²⁸ Yoshimoto, *Into Performance*, pp. 29–35

Cut Piece

First version for single performer:

Performer sits on stage with a pair of scissors in front of him.

It is announced that members of the audience may come on stage—one at a time—to cut a small piece of the performer's clothing to take with them.

Performer remains motionless throughout the piece.

Piece ends at the performer's option ...²⁹

The performer need not be Ono herself. However, it is Ono's performances which have received the most attention.³⁰ In describing this work, I am relying on a black and white film made in 1965 by Albert and David Maysles at the performance of *Cut Piece* at Carnegie Recital Hall in New York.³¹ The film is discontinuous, either through editing or because the camera has been stopped while people move in and out of the audience. There are not quite ten minutes of film. The soundtrack is made up of footsteps, shuffling, and occasional comments by the participants.

Ono sits on the stage. She is dressed in conventional clothes with her hair tied back neatly. She kneels with her feet tucked under her, the conventional way of sitting in formal situations in Japan. In front of her on the floor of the stage is placed a pair of scissors. Audience members, male and female, come up to the stage, one by one. Each audience member takes up the scissors, cuts one of Ono's garments, replaces the scissors on the floor, and walks off. The next audience member comes up to the stage and repeats the process.

One way of looking at the performance is as the construction of a ritual. Each audience member performs essentially the same act: stepping on to the stage, picking up the scissors, cutting a piece of clothing, replacing the scissors, and walking off. The formal posture of Ono and the careful ways of handling the scissors remind me of such practices as the tea ceremony, where each movement is carefully measured. Indeed,

²⁹ Kevin Concannon, 'Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*: From Text to Performance and Back Again', *PAJ*, no 90, 2008, pp. 81–93, p. 82.

³⁰ Documented performances include Yamaichi Hall, Kyoto, 20 July 1964; Sôgetsu Kaikan, Tokyo on 11 August 1964; Carnegie Recital Hall, New York in March 1965; Africa Centre in London on 28 and 29 September 1966 as part of the *Destruction in Art* symposium; 15 September 2003, Theatre Le Ranelagh in Paris. Lynn Hershmann was commissioned to stage *Cut Piece* and there is a video of this version from 1993. Jieun Rhee, 'Performing the Other: Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*', *Art History*, Volume 28, No 1, February 2005, pp. 96–118; Concannon, 'Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*', p. 85; Munroe, 'A Box of Smile', pp. 218–219.

³¹ The film clip is available at <http://bedazzled.blogspot.com/bedazzled/2006/04/yoko_ono_cut_pi.html>, last accessed 31 December 2009.

Ono herself, in a message to Yoshimoto Midori, who has completed a study of Japanese performance artists in New York, has described her art with reference to the concept of ritual.

I realized then, that it was not enough in life to just wake up in the morning, eat, talk, walk, and go to sleep. Art and music were necessities. But they were not enough, either. We needed new rituals, in order to keep our sanity.³²

Once again, a comparison with Beckett is instructive. In his essay on Proust, Beckett made the following reflection on the notion of habit, which seems relevant to Ono's musings on ritual.

The creation of the world did not take place once and for all time, but takes place every day. Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects.³³

'Cut Piece' is both cyclical and cumulative in form. Each participant performs basically the same act. However, with each successive cut, Ono's body is gradually revealed as her clothing is cut away. We could also pursue further the musical analogy from above. Each participant's repetition of the same act is a 'variation' on a theme. No act of cutting is the same as the previous one, and no performance is the same as any other.³⁴

The drama comes from watching these repetitive and transgressive acts, and from gauging Ono's emotions, as revealed in the minute transformations of her facial expression. On first viewing of the filmed performance, Ono seems totally still and impassive. Repeated viewings, however, reveal the subtle ways in which her apprehension is expressed. She blinks, and at times bites her bottom lip. Her gaze is generally still, but she blinks and shifts her gaze more rapidly at times of particular tension and apprehension. In writing about 'Cut Piece' in the twenty-first century, we are, in effect, writing about the film. While the audience members in Carnegie Hall became embodied participants, we are voyeurs, watching with fascination, unable to participate or to intervene.

In 'Cut Piece', Ono puts her own body on the line in the name of performance and ritual. As she would explain later, 'Rather than imposing

³² Yoko Ono, e-mail to Midori Yoshimoto, 13 September 1999, cited in Yoshimoto, *Into Performance*, p. 79.

³³ Samuel Beckett, Proust, 1965 [1930], p. 19, cited in Colin Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 119.

³⁴ Kevin Concannon has commented, '[h]aving conceived Cut Piece as an event score, Ono foresaw the work's realization in a succession of presents . . . And as is often the case with her work, this germinating idea is manifest in multiple variations.' Concannon, 'Yoko Ono's Cut Piece,' p. 83.

on someone the present which you have chosen, [this was a case of] ‘it doesn’t matter what; just take what you like.’³⁵ In her films, however, she attempts to distance the viewer from the usual ways of viewing the body. Film *No 13* (‘Fly’) from 1970 focuses on flies buzzing around the naked body of a woman. Film *No 5* (‘Smile’) from 1968 shows the face of John Lennon in slow motion. The gradual development of the smile on his face is barely discernible, stripping away much of the emotion.³⁶ Her film *No 4*, (‘Bottoms’) may be seen as her ultimate attempt to reduce the body to abstraction, and provides a contrast with the embodied performance pieces discussed above.³⁷

Deconstructing the Body

In the 1966 film *No 4*, (commonly known as ‘Bottoms’) Ono and Anthony Cox film a series of bodies from behind.³⁸ Each individual performs the motion of walking, with the camera focused on their naked buttocks and the tops of their thighs. Ono explains that she was fascinated by the prospect of reducing the body to a geometric grid. The screen is bisected by the horizontal and vertical lines of the buttocks, somehow removing any intimacy or connotations of sexuality or obscenity. As she explained in a later interview with Melvyn Bragg, this would ‘cut the sex out of it.’³⁹ This sense of abstraction, however, is hard to sustain when one actually watches the film.

In their simple geometry, stills from the film do seem to achieve some measure of abstraction, reminiscent of some of Hosoe Eikoh’s photography of naked bodies.⁴⁰ The geometry of these stills is also reminiscent of Man Ray’s ‘Homage to Sade’, from 1933, where bare buttocks

³⁵ Ono, *Tada no Atashi*, pp. 37–38.

³⁶ ‘Smile’ seems reminiscent of a work by Shiomie Mieko, ‘Disappearing Music for Face’, 1964, described by Munroe as ‘a performance, film, and accordion-book that presented an isolated smile gradually fading to no smile’. Munroe, ‘A Box of Smile’, p. 220.

³⁷ Many of these films also bear comparison with some of Andy Warhol’s minimalist films, such as ‘Sleep’ (1963), or ‘Empire’ (1964). See discussion in Queensland Art Gallery in Association with the Andy Warhol Museum, *Andy Warhol*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2007.

³⁸ Yoko Ono and Anthony Cox, dir. *No 4 (Bottoms)*, 1996. Extracts may be viewed at <http://randwolf2.multiply.com/video/item/408/yoko_Ono_-_BOTTOMS>, last accessed 1 September 2009.

³⁹ Yoko Ono, Interview with Melvyn Bragg, *The South Bank Show*, 5 December 1999, ITV, UK.

⁴⁰ See the series ‘Man and Woman’, 1960, and ‘Embrace’, 1971.

are overlaid with the shape of a cross. In Ray's work, however, due to the reference to Sade, sexual references are not far from the surface.

In its repetition and seriality, *No 4* is in some ways reminiscent of 'Cut Piece'. Once again we are being treated to variations on a theme. Due to the fact that we only see a very small part of each individual's body, there is a loss of individuality, compared to the intensity of physical interaction between individuals in 'Cut Piece'. However, despite the expressed desire to reduce the body to abstraction, this ideal is difficult to achieve. The first reason is that the bodies are filmed rather than being displayed in still photographs. Any perceived geometric abstraction is lost once the bodies start to move. The effect is, rather, quite hilarious. Secondly, it is difficult to overcome the shock of seeing a part of the body which is usually hidden, once again working against the desire for abstraction. Thus, when it is living and moving bodies which are being depicted—no matter how anonymous—distancing and abstraction are difficult to achieve.

Conclusions

We can thus see, in Ono's work, two opposing tendencies with respect to the body: the embodied performance of 'Cut Piece' and the disembodied abstraction of *No 4* ('Bottoms'). 'Cut Piece' can thus be placed in the context of a series of meditations on the body, and can be contrasted with Ono's more abstract works. In viewing 'Cut Piece', we are prompted to meditate on the boundaries between the private and intimate space of the body and the social. Clothes mediate between the body and social space, and it is this boundary which is breached by the ritualized cutting of the clothes.

Another reading of Ono's performance would see this as a form of ritualized violence. Under this reading, each audience member is part of a series of violent actions. Each action breaches the usual distance between individuals. Each action leaves Ono successively more vulnerable, until she is almost completely unclothed. It is not, strictly speaking, Ono's body which is subject to violence, but rather her clothing. Clothing may be seen as the final boundary between the individual body and the world outside. Simply touching another person's clothing requires a certain degree of intimacy. Cutting holes in another's clothing, or even cutting so hard that garments are effectively removed, is an act which is quite illegible in our current social system. The act can not be interpreted according to our current rules of social behaviour.

Cutting clothing is so close to cutting skin, however, that it is unnerving to watch. There seems to be an unspoken agreement that no harm will be done to Ono herself. Nevertheless, seeing someone slowly, ritually, disrobed is unnerving.⁴¹

There are also gendered dimensions to the performance. The fact that both male and female audience members participate in the ritual possibly blurs the gendered dynamics. One can not help wondering, however, how different the performance would have been if a man had been sitting there having his clothes cut off, one piece at a time. Ono has also revived the performance several times in recent years. How should we read the ritual with an elderly woman at centre stage rather than the young woman of the 1960s? And what of her son Sean making the first cut?

The piece might also invite us to meditate on sociality itself. The actions of the audience members gain meaning only because of their placement in a series. Their actions as a group invite us to speculate about the mechanisms of conformity. Finally, this work invites us to speculate on the nature of publicness. 'Cut Piece' has been performed in galleries and concert halls throughout the world. These spaces are places where spectators gather as a group for a shared experience. What is the nature of that shared experience and what politics are at stake here? In evoking these questions of sociality and publicness, Ono's work also invites us to meditate on the ethics of public performance. Can we draw a clear line between performance and group violence?

When we read these works through the prisms provided by the concepts of modernism, postmodernism and the avant-garde, further perspectives are revealed. This is not to suggest that the meanings of the works can finally be pinned down in a definitive reading, but rather that new meanings can be opened up. What was avant-garde in the 1960s has become almost familiar with the repeated viewings of the Maysles' film and several decades of accreted commentary. Reading the performances through the prism of modernism might lead us to focus on the qualities of rhythm and repetition, the variations on a theme. However,

⁴¹ In the video of Lynn Hershmann's staging of 'Cut Piece', the violent undertones of the piece are foregrounded through editing. Three different stagings with three different women are intercut. A moment from one of Ono's performances where a man apparently brandished the scissors in a threatening manner is recreated, with the camera focusing on the glistening scissors. One of the women in Hershmann's restaging exercises the right of the performer to stop the performance. Hershmann's editing loses the contemplative quality of Ono's performance in the Maysles' film.

in contrast to the modernist interest in consciousness, there is little sense of interiority to these performances. Rather, there is a focus on surface manifestations, which is compatible with postmodern artistic practice. Reading the works through the prism of postmodernism, then, might lead us to focus on the ways in which conventions of narrative are challenged and on the techniques of defamiliarization and denaturalization.

If we place these works in their temporal context, they are in the middle of the 1960s. In Japan, this decade opened with the mass demonstrations against the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty and closed with the suicide of Mishima Yukio. In Japan, as in other advanced countries, the sixties saw the development of the counter-culture, opposition against the Vietnam War, and the development of militant student activism. In Ono's works of the mid-1960s, there are no explicit intertextual references to these events. Rather there are intertextual links to other works of the avant-garde movements of the time. It is only later in the decade, in events such as the Bed-In for Peace in Amsterdam in 1969 with John Lennon, that we start to see explicit political references. Nevertheless, some commentators have attempted to project this pacifist and feminist consciousness back on to the earlier works. In this chapter, however, I have preferred to focus on a close reading of the traces of the works which have survived in textual, photographic and filmic form.