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MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
THE ROCKS
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA
15 NOVEMBER 2013

OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION
'WAR IS OVER!
IF YOU WANT IT'

BY YOKO ONO

IMAGINE YOKO!

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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IN THE MOOD

On this wonderful occasion in Sydney, Australia, full of energy and love for our guest of honour, let us put ourselves in the right mood by remembering the marvellous words and music which John Lennon wrote with the help and inspiration of Yoko Ono:

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too*

* One time Justice of the High Court of Australia and President of the International Commission of Jurists.

*Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...*

*You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one*

We are here to open an exhibition of a remarkable woman and artist. In just a few days, she has captured the heart and the imagination of our city and of our country.

But to understand her artistic work, it is essential to know something of her life. Out of her experiences, especially early experiences, grew a most determined person who recently told the *London Times*:¹

“I’m 80. I’m a control freak and I’m going for it!”

Yoko Ono was born in February 1933 in Tokyo, Japan. Her name means “ocean child”. She was the daughter of a distinguished family with a proud lineage. Her father was banker. In 1935 he took his young family to San Francisco and in 1940 to New York City, which was later to become Yoko’s home.

Under the shadow of war, the family left in 1941 for Hanoi. They were caught up in the conflict and her father was later confined to a concentration camp. Back in Tokyo, Yoko’s neighbourhood, and then the entire city, was subjected to carpet bombing. She was sent to the mountains for safety. The wealth of the family fell away. All that mattered was survival and gathering crumbs for food.

In August 1945, atomic explosions over Hiroshima and then Nagasaki brought dreadful suffering to those affected. Yoko was but 12 years of age. Little wonder, with this background, that she became a strong voice against war. It is a voice that she still proclaims today.

¹ *The Times*, London, 24 October 2013, 3.

In 1946, Yoko returned to her old school in Tokyo. In her class was the future Emperor of Japan, Akihito. She entered upon graduate studies in philosophy and was the first woman admitted to that course. Through books and words she tried to find an explanation for the sufferings she had witnessed and felt. But they were not enough.

What had Yoko Ono's life that time taught her?

- A hatred of war;
- A rejection of the inevitability of conflict and suffering;
- A love of modesty and quiet understatement; and
- A belief in her own values and a resilience to insist upon them.

From these hard times, Yoko has exhibited through life many attitudes of the outsider. In America, as a girl, she was foreigner. In the mountains, she was seeking refuge from her former life with its dangers. After the war, her people were demoralised and humiliated. She remembered how the clouds of the sky had been a canopy over the good and the bad times. She came to love clouds. They feature heavily in her art. They are calm and nearly always there.

Yesterday, in Sydney, it was a cloudless day. Today, to bid welcome to Yoko for this opening, the clouds have returned. (In fact there are a few too many thank you and whilst rain is always a gift to us in Australia, we can suspend the downpours whilst we join here tonight).

YOKO AND JOHN

In 1952, Yoko returned to New York City. Her family was concerned that her quest to express herself in art had turned her into a 'bohemian'. She studied music and poetry. She undertook a liberal arts course in the Bronx. But she knew that something inside her drove her to express deep feelings that had grown out of her life's experiences. She began exhibiting art from the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Yoko's first marriage was to Toshi Ichiyanagi. He was a gifted musician and she returned with him to Japan for concerts.

But then she formed a new relationship with Anthony Cox, a jazz player. Later she would marry him and give birth to their daughter, Kyoko. After Yoko and Anthony fell out in 1971, she suffered the terrible and grievous loss when her daughter was abducted by her partner. On top of the sufferings of war came suffering terribly close to her. The loss of her daughter took decades to heal.

It was during this time that Yoko met John Lennon. Everyone here knows and loves the memory of John. But it is important to say that Yoko met him at the Indicia Gallery in London, owned by John Dunbar, partner to the beautiful and gifted Marianne Faithfull. Although the whole world knew John and the Beatles, Yoko was blissfully unawares. It was a good way to start their relationship. John had been drawn to the gallery because he was intrigued and attracted by Yoko's art.

In 1969, John Lennon and Yoko married. They became for a time, the most famous married couple in the world. The times were changing. Young people were rejecting the necessity of war. John and Yoko promoted peace in many ways. They shared a "bed in peace". John Lennon took the name "Ono" to his own. He became "John Winston Ono Lennon", legally. The media, ever salacious, hoped for high jinx from the bedded couple. But all they wanted to do was to "give peace a chance". Barred from entering the United States, they recorded this marvellous song in Montreal: knocking on the door of America. Showing their solidarity with all those protesting against the slaughter in Vietnam.

At this time, the burdens cast on Yoko showed no respite. She suffered hostility to her relationship with John:

- She was a foreigner to his homely Englishness;
- She was older than he;
- She was blamed for breaking up the Beatles and, though false, the accusation stuck;

- She was accused with leading John into contact with radical leaders like Malcom X, whereas they were mutual friends, often in a mutual cause.

In 1975, their son Sean was born. Yoko was entitled to hope that her life would take on a new and calmer pattern.

LOSS OF JOHN/COMFORT IN ART

And so Yoko came to that terrible night outside the Dakota Building in New York, abutting Central Park. John Lennon was murdered there. Outside the home they shared in peace and harmony. As if her burdens had not been great enough, she lost the joy of John's companionship and stimulation. To spare her neighbours in the Dakota, she founded Strawberry Fields in the park just opposite. It is a quiet and beautiful place in which to reflect on life and loss and memory.

I was in New York two weeks ago, to deliver a report to the General Assembly on the Inquiry in which I am engaged for the United Nations on North Korea. I walked from downtown Manhattan where the great United Nations building stands, up to the Dakota Building on West 72nd Street. It was a long walk. It allowed a time for reflection and to consider what life's lessons had taught Yoko, the artist, the widow.

- They had toughened her. She is a survivor.
- They had strengthened her as an artist. She had collaborated with John Lennon in music. That energy magnified her art;
- She grew beyond passive observance of art. She wanted participation. She wanted those who viewed her works to take a piece of cloud. Or to affix a message on the wish tree. Passivity excuses war and violence. We must all take part in our world.
- She was challenging perceived modes of expression;
- She was not sentimental;
- She was self-effacing still but she knew how to pull a crowd – for who she was and for what she stood for.

Since the new century began, Yoko Ono has stepped up her work for peace. In 2002 she made a grant for a peace prize. In 2004 she embraced a new cause: equality in sexuality. She wrote a new verse for her popular song. It read:

“Every man has a man who loves him.
Every woman has a woman who loves her.”

For these words, I thank her. Not everyone sings them in tune. But eventually they will. We can imagine that time. We are not mere dreamers when we do so.

Yoko continues to embrace new causes. Earlier this year, with artists in Pennsylvania, she embarked on a protest against fracking. She is not conventional. Her mind remains open to new varieties of violence and she lifts her voice against it.

AND SO HER ART

For six decades, Yoko has been dedicated to peace. She has been striving to express her yearning for peace in visible form. Six weeks ago, in Brisbane, I delivered a peace lecture. Not then knowing that I would be in Yoko’s presence, I declared that peace between nations and in society cannot come about without internal peace. Disrespect of others – because they are Aboriginal; because they are Asian or African; because they are refugees; because they are gay. These are the challenges to peace. Internal conflict and hostility breeds external manifestations. John Lennon knew this and it caused him to urge us to imagine.

There are so many treasures in this display of Yoko’s art in this exhibition. But I would single out four of them for special attention:

- *The Wish Tree* for Sydney: Yoko’s gift to the MCA’s sculpture terrace. It takes inspiration from the old Shinto temples. It invites participation, including by small children. It attracts us to the

lemon scented eucalypts. It symbolises our collective engagement, and our shared hopes, dreams and thoughts;

- “*Play it by Trust*”. This is a very cerebral work. A chess board with every figure in white. How can one play chess without the differentiation of black and white, I hear you say. Too much back and white in our world. Too much organised conflict. An all white board encourages “a duet between equals”. It requires the players to make new rules, so that they are not divided but play in harmony together;
- “*Helmets, Piece of Sky*” – the reversed wartime helmet contains jigsaw pieces of blue sky and the lovely clouds that are Yoko’s symbol. Because the sky and clouds cover us all, they are a symbol of a kind of unity in the world. Helmets divide us. The sky with its canopy, unites us;
- “*My Mommy is Beautiful*” – this very moving piece moves many viewers to tears. It taps the deep love and need that most of us have for our mother. I challenge anyone to look upon it and not to feel those deep human emotions.

GREAT SPIRITS

It not easy to pigeon hole Yoko Ono. Her journey has been unconventional. Her art is encouraged by music, conceived by poetry and inspired by philosophy.

Today I was busy launching a little book of my own. It would be vulgar to abuse this occasion to promote it. Suffice it to say that it is published by Penguin and it is titled *What Would Gandhi Do?*

As I did the rounds of the broadcasting studios, and reflected on the encounter that awaited me at the end of the day, suddenly I could see a link between these two special spirits from great civilisations of Asia. M.K. Gandhi and Yoko Ono.

Gandhi too was a great opponent of war and violence. Yet he was struck down in violence and left a nation and the world mourning. Yoko

has suffered such a loss. Still there are links between these master spirits:

- Gandhi saw that peace could not be achieved whilst women were subjected to violence and patriarchy;
- Gandhi preached the love of our world and of the entire biosphere;
- Gandhi saw the importance of every living creature in the world, not just human beings;
- Gandhi conceived the vital role of love and sexuality; and
- Gandhi taught the equality of all and that war is over as a means of attaining progress.

Yoko Ono has come to our far away country to teach similar lessons. She does so by her art. She does so by linking us once again, to John Lennon and the words he penned in tribute to her deep feelings that she now shares with us:

*“Image no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...”*

*You may say I’m a dreamer
But I’m not the only one
I hope someday you’ll join us
And the world will live as one.”*

The exhibition by Yoko Ono, *War is Over! If You Want It*, is opened.

