



A message from Yoko

Ono's film, *Imagine Peace*, set to Lennon's song, is a very personal contribution to the London 2012 Festival, she tells Ben Luke



Outside the Serpentine Gallery on a rare lovely summer's day, crowds are thronging around five small Cornus trees. Dangling from the branches are pieces of card on which people have written their wishes — for peace in Syria, for mutual respect, for blue skies, for wishes to come true. These are Yoko Ono's Wish Trees, the latest incarnation of a work she first produced in 1996, and though it is only the first few days of her new show at the gallery, their branches are already choked with people's dreams. Inside, too, Ono's exhibition is packed.

"I am still in shock!" she tells me. Dressed all in black with a straw boater and her customary purple-tinted glasses, she is 80 next year but looks a good 15 years younger. She smiles frequently, and speaks quietly, with a still prominent Japanese accent, her arms swaying across the table poetically as she speaks. Her amazement seems genuine — she is still far from accustomed to her art being popular.

John Lennon's quip that she was "the world's most famous unknown artist" held true until around a decade ago, when galleries began looking again at her work, particularly the haiku-like written instructions and the provocative and pioneering performances of the Sixties.

"With me, the situation didn't change for 40 or 50 years," she says. "There were a few people who really liked my work, and were passionate about it, but the general public were either upset about it or they ignored it, and that is how I thought it would be."

Another huge project is now being unveiled. As part of the London 2012 Festival, the Olympics' cultural extravaganza that begins in earnest today, Ono presents her film *Imagine Peace* at what are known as the Olympic "live sites" — big screens throughout the country, including five in London (only Waltham Forest and Woolwich open today; the others launch a week before the Olympics).

Imagine Peace is a short film, in which the words of the title slowly appear in a huge range of languages to the strains of Lennon's *Imagine*. "I am so glad," Ono says of her participation. "Just the fact that *Imagine Peace* will be on the screen or on the TV will be fantastic, even for two seconds."

I ask what the ultimate goal of the project is. She hopes, she says, that "without having any scratch or hurt, we will get peace". Ultimately, it is a conceptual work, an attempt, like so much of Ono's art, to free the viewer's imagination rather than persuade towards a particular cause.

The roots of *Imagine Peace* lie, of course, in her Sixties activism, and particularly a conviction in collective, peaceful protest that developed, she says, after she and Lennon saw innocent people hurt at a Sixties demonstration in Chicago. "Some activists probably think they can be daring, it doesn't matter if I lose my life," she says. "But my feeling is that anyone who stands alone like that is likely to disappear. I really think that it is very important that we take another method, a new method, which is to do it through imagination, because I want to save their lives, too. I don't want anybody to be hurt."

This idea of the danger of protesting immediately conjures the recent ordeal of Ai Weiwei, whose pavilion sits outside the Serpentine this summer, and who was arrested last year and disappeared for several weeks following his criticism of the Chinese state. Ono campaigned for his release. She praises him now for “adding a strong spirit to international activism, with his incredible history of pain and wise judgement”.

Sean, her and Lennon’s 36-year-old son, has taken on his parents’ campaigning mantle as a vocal supporter of Occupy — he and Rufus Wainwright led a satirical version of Material Girl at Occupy Wall Street last October. “I think he’s clever,” his mother says, “because instead of going there and singing Imagine, which would be thought of in a different way, it was a Madonna song! That’s great, a little sense of humour. The Bed-In was done with a big sense of humour and we thought everybody was going to laugh at it, but it didn’t work out that way.”

I ask how she feels about Imagine Peace — and her exhibition — being shown in connection with the Olympics. “The Olympics has an important identity, for people to look at the mirror of themselves, and how much we can do physically, as human beings. I am not going to say anything negative about what happened in China. The Chinese Olympics were grand — everything that human power can do, they put it out. And what we can do is not compete with them, but to show the other side, which is that, still, a spiritual power is very important. I think we are going to show that spirit power, all of us together — it is very English.”

This country’s spirit impressed her immediately when she first came here from New York in September 1966 for the legendary Destruction in Art Symposium, a massive countercultural event held at Covent Garden’s Africa Centre, at which Ono was the star turn. She performed several works including the seminal Cut Piece, the tense performance in which she sits motionless as audience members cut away her clothing with scissors, bit by bit.

She first met Lennon at a St James’s gallery later that year. It is worth remembering in light of Imagine Peace and the Wish Trees that what drew Lennon to Ono was the positive messages in her art. It is a feeling that radiates from 1968’s Film No.5 (Smile), in which the Beatle, in slow motion, breaks into an infectious grin.

Smiles have long featured in Ono’s work. An early conceptual piece claims to have captured a smile in a box, and as early as 1967, Ono was declaring her desire to capture everyone in the world smiling. It may sound banal, but it has become an increasingly personal project. “After John’s passing, I found out how important smiling is: for spiritual, mental and physical health,” Ono says.

After 45 years, she is at last putting this long-cherished idea into action with #smilesfilm, another London 2012 Festival event. The hashtag is significant, because the work’s home is on Twitter and Instagram, where people can upload images of themselves and others smiling. These are then collated on a website and iPhone app.

Ono has 2.5 million Twitter followers and clearly relishes reaching new audiences in the digital age, as was evident when Lady Gaga joined her and the Plastic Ono Band onstage in Los Angeles in 2010, a performance which ended with Ono and Gaga lying on their backs on a piano. It has now been watched by hundreds of thousands on YouTube. “Wasn’t it great?” she exclaims. “I thought Lady Gaga was fantastic, and we should show her energy to John and Yoko’s fans. And she came and played something on the white piano. A lot of people said, ‘How dare you let her do that?’ It is a very strange world — you really go into a class situation, and we are all the same class, actually. And also, she is an incredible musician, and only some people know that.”

But as she knows only too well, some prejudices die hard. When she sent Paul McCartney a 70th-birthday message on Twitter this week, some didn’t believe it was sincere, still seeing her as the catalyst for the Beatles split. “I just want to celebrate him for being, what, not 18!” she says. “And it is not easy to stay alive in a real way, not just physically but mentally — to be what you are — and he is trying his best.”

After all these years, Ono is inured to the Beatles-related barbs. “I was a scapegoat, it’s as simple as that,” she says. But it has been a long battle to be accepted in general.

“I had three things against me: to be a foreigner, to be a woman, and to be an artist of the avant garde, not the accepted form. This is aside from breaking up the Beatles, or whatever they were thinking.”

But now she is more prolific creatively than she has been at any time since the Sixties. While she says that Lennon was “totally supportive” of her work, she admits that she would hide it — “it was better to do something together”, she says. “Now I more or less have the freedom to do things without considering another person.”

As the crowds at the Serpentine and uploads to the #smilesfilm site show, many are ready to take her to their hearts at last.

Yoko Ono’s To The Light exhibition is at The Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens, W2. Until September 9 (020 7402 6075, serpentinegallery.org). Imaginepeace.com.