

## ***Imagine: The Peace Ballad of John & Yoko***

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Dorota Kozinska

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MONTREAL, QC

# IMAGINE

## THE PEACE BALLAD OF JOHN & YOKO

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April 2 to June 24, 2009

Advertised as a grand coup for Montreal, this 'exclusively at the Montreal of Fine Arts' exhibition on the theme of John Lennon's and Yoko Ono's Bed-in offers a mixture of the historical with the didactic, blended together in a thick air of idolatry. Organised by the MMFA in collaboration with Ms Ono, it will be presented as well as part of this year's Venice Biennale.

Forty years after the famous happening-cum-protest held in Suite 1742 of Montreal's Queen Elizabeth Hotel, the show, alas, is but an echo of the thrill the duo caused in the city, mostly giving those who were witness to that seminal moment a frisson of memory, an opportunity to reminisce.

But memory is all that is left, despite rooms filled with photographs, record covers, letters, notes, both musical and literary, a sampling of John's delicate line drawings, a replica of the hotel bed, and another of Lennon's white grand piano.

Intent on avoiding the written material – already mentally saturated with the plethora of texts on John and Yoko and the wild days of the Plastic Ono Band and Nutopia – I decided to focus on the actual works of art on display,

the timeless reminders of those heady times, and a continuing link to the present –

a connection underlined by Yoko Ono herself, who opened the exhibition, causing quite a stir with her vast entourage of body guards and agents.

It proved to be a kind of a treasure hunt for the writer, meandering among the eclectic mementos not only of an era, but also of one of the most fascinating relationships, one between two kindred souls of such diverse backgrounds.

Upon entering the exhibition hall, the visitor is instantly invited into a private, intimate space, greeted by old photographs of John and Yoko, and the sound of their haunting voices calling each other's names.

This invisible reaching out weaves throughout the show and is the work of the exhibition's art director and sound designer, Thierry Planelle, former art director at Virgin Music/EMI and visual and sound creative director for Virgin France. Now an independent producer for the Maturity Music label, he also created the aural design for the MMFA's exhibition *Warhol Live*. Aware of the 'constant dialogue' between John and Yoko throughout their lives and careers, he magically reproduced this connection in the ethereal, otherworldly voices that follow and seek each other, it seems for eternity.



John Lennon et Yoko Ono entourés de journalistes, chambre 1742, hôtel Queen Elizabeth, Montréal, 1969  
John Lennon and Yoko Ono surrounded by journalists, Room 1742, Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Montreal, 1969  
Photo Le Journal de Montréal / Jacques Bourdon

The exhibition is neatly divided into comprehensive chapters, from an introduction to the era and the artists' separate yet complimentary opposition to political events, their first meeting in 1966, through the Bed-in and the "War is Over! If you Want It" furor of 1969, to the New York City days and the final, still relevant, *Imagine Peace* segment.

The room marking the meeting of the two at the preview of Ono's exhibition *Unfinished Paintings and Objects* at London's Indica Gallery, was where I first struck gold with the *Ceiling Painting* installation composed of a white ladder, with a white square suspended above it, upon which appeared a tiny word 'yes'. There was also a video of her mesmerizing 1965 performance *Cut Pieces*, in which the visiting public was invited to cut off small fragments of the black dress she was wearing.

Ono's avant-garde, minimalist pieces are truly fascinating, combining refined sophistication with touching frank expression of a personal vision, as in *Glass Keys to Open Skies*.

Her invitation to participate in the creative process has become Ono's trademark, and despite the mostly didactic, not to say commemorative character of this exhibition, she managed to draw the Montreal public into her world and beyond, as in her ubiquitous *Wish Tree* installa-

tions that had visitors write their sentiments on labels and attach them to the tree branches, which by the way, were real.

What was not real was John Lennon's famous white piano, a replica of which was placed in the centre of large white circular panels that resembled a stylized Stonehenge. The song *Imagine* emanated from the loudspeakers, creating an eerie, altar-like atmosphere. Those brave enough were invited to perform their own version of the song at the keys, getting as close to their dead idol as one can get, I imagine. John's presence, ethereal throughout the exhibition and consisting mainly of his voice mingling with the ambient sounds of the public, as well as piped in, almost took shape within the confines of the space.

And yet, despite the contrived nature of this corner of *The Peace Ballad of John & Yoko* exhibition, it was the hardest room to leave... John reciting these unforgettable words, and Yoko's voice calling to him from somewhere far away...

And before I shake the nostalgia, I will wallow in it for a while longer, and quote from Ono's *Grapefruit* haiku collection and inspiration for the song *Imagine*:

*A dream you dream alone is only a dream,*

*A dream you dream together is reality.* □