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In the bag with Yoko

Yoko Ono is known for her performance art.

She and husband John Lennon famously held weeklong bed-ins for peace, one in Montreal and one in Amsterdam, to protest the Vietnam War.

But even before that, the avant-garde artist was doing performance art.

One of her well-known works is "Cut Piece," first performed in 1964, in which she knelt on the floor, a pair of scissors in front of her. One by one, viewers would approach her and cut off a piece of her clothing and take it with them.

John Noga, co-curator of the original "Yoko Ono Imagine Peace" exhibit in Akron, Ohio, decided to perform the piece.

It was an interesting experience, he says.

"People would get 10 feet away from me and have this realization that they've crossed this liminal space," he says. "It was also interesting what people said to me: 'You're so brave.' I didn't feel brave doing it."

"A lot of people thanked me for being willing to do it. The most interesting, funny thing was my mother, who at the time was 82, had said, 'I just don't get it.' But she was the last person to cut from me. It was just interesting that she was the last person."

He then stood up, and a lot of his clothing, what was left of it, fell off.

"It was an intense performance," he says. "It's a powerful work."

Performing "Cut Piece" didn't make him feel vulnerable, it made him feel empowered, he says.

"It was actually right after one of the most difficult times in my life. A part of



YOKO ONO 2009 ©SYNAESTHETE

life is sacrifice. We have to sacrifice for others; we have to be cut at, or snipped at, to have a true experience. It was a metaphor for what life is. If you constantly protect yourself, shield yourself, you're not going to experience anything.

"It's about making yourself available, putting yourself out there. It was incredible. It was something I'll never regret."

Co-curator Kevin Concannon, now professor of art history at Virginia Tech and director of its school of visual arts, once performed with Ms. Ono. He was a student at the University of Akron at the time, and attended a lecture she was giving in the summer of 2002.

In the middle of the lecture, she asked if the exhibition manager was there. He said

he was, but then she said, no, she meant his wife. But his wife wasn't there.

She was pacing back and forth, and then asked if Kevin Concannon was there.

He thought, "Oh crap, what's going to happen? I saw the black bag on the floor," he says.

She wanted him to perform "Bag Piece" with her, a work she had first performed in 1964.

"It's a large black cloth sack," Mr. Concannon describes. "I had to climb into it with her. You get inside the bag, and take off one piece of clothing at a time. You keep putting each (item) outside the bag — your shoes first."

"You just see two figures, moving around randomly, and the clothing comes outside the bag."

They could see the audience through the bag, but the audience couldn't see them, he says, only the bag moving and bulging and pieces of clothing coming out of it. Then the action was reversed: the two took back their clothing into the bag, piece by piece, and got dressed.

The performance lasted about 15 minutes.

When Mr. Concannon returned to school, he says, "The students had heard about it, and the talk was that I had been naked on stage with Yoko Ono. The fact that we had been in a bag was completely left out."

Had he been naked?

"More or less," he hedges.

He pauses.

"My wife didn't appreciate it," he says.

Another pause.

"And I have a film of it." ■

— Nancy Stetson