



FLICKHEAD

CONCEPTS & CREATIONS



Rika Ohara

THE HEART OF NO PLACE

POLITICS, TECHNOLOGY AND, IN SHORT, A CHUNK OF MY LIFE

By Rika Ohara

The Heart of No Place was born where the artist/filmmaker Rika Ohara's experiences as a Japanese woman meet those of Yoko Ono. It premiered at Festival International de Films de Femmes de Créteil in 2009, screened at nine international festivals including Göteborg International Film Festival, and won the Best Film (International) award at London Independent Film Festival in 2010. It has since been released on Amazon Instant Video.

The Heart of No Place began in the 1990s when I heard a conspiracy theory which had it that Yoko Ono had been planted by her father's corporation to break up the Beatles. I was working at the time on an interdisciplinary theater (media and dance performance) piece titled *Tokyo Rose* — which juxtaposed the “trade war with Japan” of the late 20th Century and the story of L.A.-born *Nisei* Iva Toguri (1916-2006), who was convicted for treason for broadcasting Japanese propaganda on shortwave radio.

Since the oil crisis in the 1970s, small Japanese cars had been sidelining the stately gas guzzlers of the glory days of American automobiles. And not only cars: the Japanese were making better stereos and television sets, too. The phrase “Made in Japan” was changing its meaning. Old hardliners — who presumably saw combat in the Pacific — were still alive and vocal, comparing presidential candidate Bill Clinton to none other than Tokyo Rose for his youthful visit to the USSR.

In the 1930s, Anna May Wong complained that Asian actors were always cast as villains: “and so crude a villain, murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass.” Her first starring roles were in Europe, from where she returned with enough star power to turn down more roles as daughters of Fu Manchu offered by Hollywood. More recently, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, with its “yellow peril” opening in which a mud-splattered horde of Asian immigrants overran a future Los Angeles, opened on June 25, 1982 — two days after Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Detroit man who was assaulted by baseball-bat-wielding auto workers, died after four days in a coma. In this environment, “Japanese corporation” was a phrase that stirred a vague dread — like “Russian Mafia” or “Arab terrorist” continue to do: a faceless enemy, bent on economic takeover and domination.

Twenty years later, variants of the Ono theory still seem to excite some nuts: as recently as 2011, there was a Facebook page dedicated to tying Ono and her family to Lennon's death. But this other Ono theory popped up in 1992. We were looking at a new century. Ono's appearance on the horizon of the Western consciousness, when she met Lennon in 1966, was a mere twenty years after the end of World War II, and the public — even the generation supposedly enlightened by the '60s counterculture — reacted accordingly. It *was* thinkable, if not exactly in good taste, that Paul McCartney would sing “Get back to where you once belonged” at Yoko, and that George Harrison as a film producer would permit a Nazi girlfriend to replace a Japanese one in *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (1978).

The Ono theory brought me face to face with a nagging idea I'd had over the years: I would do a performance piece built around a figure resembling Yoko Ono, another 20th Century icon like Tokyo Rose, known more for the myths than the facts surrounding her. Hell, being an artist, I might even be over-qualified, thank you very much.

First, my counter-theory — as wacky as any conspiracy theory: didn't the U.S., with its hardware industries rapidly sinking, have more to gain if a foreign competition in the cultural/intellectual commodities market was removed?

The American hardware industry was in decline, no doubt about it. Not only were they losing market shares to Japanese goods, their businesses were actively exporting labor to developing countries. With my “artistic” bias, a future in which “developed” nations would switch to the soft-centered economy — focused on manufacturing of cultural and intellectual properties — didn't seem a stretch. Twenty years and a few generations of iPods later, if no one is making much money in the music industry, Hollywood movies seem to be doing brisk business.

This transition from the hardware dependency would be the connection between currents of world economy and Ono's work: Ono, having studied music and philosophy, joined the Fluxus movement, where she began composing post-object artworks in performances and writing. Even her objects, sculptures and installations were translations of “concepts.” While predominantly white male artists of the postwar New York school were busy erecting big steel sculptures, Ono seemed to be making artworks that are, if not necessarily “small” in scope, *portable* — like Japanese electronics.

Like *Tokyo Rose*, I began working on *The Heart of No Place* as an interdisciplinary theater piece. Even though I drew *manga* in my teens — and, inspired by Osamu Tezuka's cinematic style, watched more than two hundred films as a self-directed curriculum in cinema history during one year of high school — media art was not a large part of my education. In fact, I chose 35mm film slides to create animations as a core visual element in my performances and installations because video was too expensive (besides the equipment, you had to book an editing studio) and of such low quality (when projected, its Minecraft-size pixels were washed out by any amount of stage lighting).

In the meantime, I ran into problems with *Tokyo Rose*, which, in retrospect, became the decisive factor in my decision to abandon the sinking ship that was performance art. I spent most of 1995 trying to book a tour of the piece. I had gotten bites from ICA in London, Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Paris American Center. The Paris curator faxed me to ask when I wanted to come to Paris. I replied: in spring '96? But she was to leave her post in November, and in December, one night around 1 a.m. PST, I placed a call to Paris:

“Americain Center, Bonjour.”

“Good morning. My name is Rika Ohara. I'm calling from Los Angeles. I was working with your former curator Mademoiselle Suissa for presentation of my performance piece at the American Center next year...”

Then I heard on the other end of the line: “I don't know what to say...” I could scarcely believe what I was hearing: they were closing the theater as of February first. Out of budget — two years after they had opened this brand-new theater designed by Frank Gehry!

This was followed by news from The Kitchen in Manhattan. Their hybrid curator was

pregnant, and was moving to Paris. She wanted to know if I thought *Tokyo Rose* was more dance or more theater. I told her it was exactly what her own title indicated: a hybrid. Then I got a letter from the ICA curator: she was leaving, too, citing budget cuts and a conflict with a “horrible new boss.” Then a letter from Minneapolis in which the renowned curator of the Walker Art Center told me he could not get a “sense of live performance from the video” and wanted to see a live performance. With Paris, New York and London down, I didn’t know where to invite him. Later I discovered he had taken the position of executive director — not curator — at a new art center in Northern California.

In hindsight, all this took place five or six years after the fall of the Soviet Union. During the ‘80s, the Wilson-Glass style *Gesamtkunstwerk* was the order of the day. Expansive. Avant-garde. That was America’s answer to the Bolshoi Ballets of the Eastern Bloc. But with the end of the Cold War, the whole *raison-d’être* of federal support for the arts went up in smoke. It was one of the reasons why “multiculturalism” became one of the focal points of arts funding in the early ‘90s. As conservatives condemned what they considered “degenerate art” as a waste of “taxpayers’ money,” arts organizations were grasping for whatever proved the social utility of art. If artists mourned the demise of National Endowment for the Arts individual grants, the venues were feeling just as much pain, if not more.

There was hope, too. The Kitchen’s new hybrid curator was nice enough to send words of praise for *Tokyo Rose*: “I can’t get it out of my mind. So beautiful, so advanced.” Yet by the mid-‘90s it was obvious that Japan, too, was sinking into a recession. Rising Sun vs. Sinking American Economy seemed no longer relevant. So instead I shared with her the idea for *The Heart of No Place*. With a possible New York premiere in the works, I arranged for a meeting with Fondation Cartier in Paris. (Cartier’s former curator, whom I would later find at Pompidou Centre, had also sent me a nice word or two about *Tokyo Rose*). The night before the meeting in Paris, I met the previous curator from The Kitchen — now in Paris — and went to see a performance of a Scottish performance group at the Cartier. Over coffee after the show, the new mother disclosed that her successors had already been “forced to resign.”

The beginning of the Cartier meeting the next day did not bode well. The curator had misplaced my files. When I related the news about The Kitchen, she asked me, “*Why* did you contact Cartier?” She subsequently announced that Yoko Ono was “a character from the ‘70s,” following up with “no one would be interested in the problem between the Japanese and the Americans.” That was when I decided to make *The Heart of No Place* into a no-budget film.

In 1998, a Dogme signatory, Thomas Vinterberg, was interviewed by the *L.A. Weekly*. He revealed that the Dogme filmmakers were using cameras that cost around \$1,500. I had just gotten hold of a Sony Digital 8 camera — the first digital video camera to retail for under \$1,000. In 1999, I used the camera to convert *Shelter* from a live-performance-in-installation piece into a video installation for an exhibition in Tokyo. The footage of dancers, shot in my 10’x13’ living room, was assembled on a second-generation iMac — brand-new that year, with built-in FireWire ports. All of a sudden, making a “movie” was looking plausible. I would not wait for the funding and the venue to become available: I would make my artwork first, then the rest would follow. *A liberation*.

After the platform shift, several things became clear: it would *not* be a straight biopic of

Yoko Ono — just as *Tokyo Rose* wasn't a biography of Iva Toguri. Instead it would combine faux interviews and “remixes” of Ono's artworks to play with the audience's sense of what's “real” and urge them to use their imaginations to unearth hidden threads. The intimacy of video — by then firmly associated with home movies shot on Hi8 — would also be an advantage in creating a false sense of looking into someone's private thoughts.

The Heart of No Place began shooting in Tokyo in December 1999 — where the live footage of Dieter Moebius (Cluster) and Michael Rother (Kraftwerk, Neu) in concert was captured — continuing on to L.A., Berlin, Rome, Liverpool, Ho Chi Minh City and Death Valley. Cologne filmmaker Peter Schulte assembled a second unit for a scene. I had purposely avoided filming in New York City, but an eerie coincidence took me there: after shooting the scene of ‘Y.’ working on her glass-and-sugar chess board, I animated sugar cubes on the board, building a city of skyscrapers. The night session continued into the wee hours. It ended with the camera “flying” into the city, culminating in a collision with its tallest structure. The morning after, I woke up to the news of two passenger planes crashing into the World Trade Center. In another coincidence, Michael Arad's 9/11 memorial (2011) simply doubles Ono's *Imagine Peace Tower* (2007) — but I will leave that to future conspiracy theorists.

In addition to Moebius and Rother appearing as themselves, Can's Holger Czukay was prominently featured on a Sunset Strip billboard in the film. L.A. performance-art legends Bob & Bob appeared as art critics; sampling pioneer Carl Stone turned on his radio-personality charm. Working in video was a blessing. I could not have hoped for the participation of such a stellar cast in a live project.

After a break in 2003-5 — during which my son was born — the film received a finishing fund from California Community Foundation. Yoko Ono herself generously granted the use of her song for the soundtrack, and the rest was... not yet history. In 2008, the credit crisis hit the fan, just as the film's final chapter, with its musings on “virtual money,” was on the editing table.

To watch *The Heart of No Place* on Amazon, [click here](#)

To visit the *The Heart of No Place* website, [click here](#)

Rika Ohara is presently working on a project based on J. Sheridan Le Fanu's Carmilla.

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