

(Un)Named: Yoko Ono & Yayoi Kusama

Curated by Rachel Chau and Maple Wang and Schaeffer Fine Arts Library Collections

(Un)Named: Yoko Ono & Yayoi Kusama welcomes you into a conversation with two visionary Japanese artists, Yoko Ono(1933) and Yayoi Kusama(1929). Through archival encounters with their artworks and writings, this exhibition invites you to re-read, reflect, and directly engage with their artistic voices.

As pioneering Asian women artists, Ono and Kusama gained early recognition on the international stage and made significant contributions to the Western avant-garde through their performance and conceptual art. Despite their success, both faced structural barriers in the pursuit of creative freedom. Each experienced criticism and recognition, each was burdened by the labels imposed by others—yet both persisted in speaking through art. Their paths, though independent, echo one another in their refusal to be silenced. The journey of women artists has never been easy. Ono and Kusama's unwavering drive for self-expression, combined with their ambition and resilience, has shaped who they are today. Their work continues to inspire and illuminate the possibilities for all artists, especially women, prompting reflection on a lingering question: Have women's voices in art ever truly been heard clearly?

The exhibition is structured around four thematic sections, featuring eight significant books focused exclusively on Ono and Kusama. These texts offer intimate, unvarnished glimpses into their worlds, revealing how each artist, through personal battles and social resistance, crafted her own identity through art. Here, words become both sword and shield. The criticism directed at Ono and Kusama has been transformed into fuel for creation. Misinterpretation and labelling have often obscured their true selves, but the selected books aim to reframe those narratives, opening a candid dialogue around what it means to be Yoko Ono or Yayoi Kusama, and what they have sought to express.

The exhibition also draws attention to the exceptional holdings of the Schaeffer Fine Arts Library Toshiba Room, which contains over 800 items related to Japanese culture. It reflects the library's commitment to diversity in collecting and its role in fostering cross-cultural understanding. The collection on Ono and Kusama becomes an entry point into broader conversations about women's expression in the vast history of artmaking. Their singular voices encourage deeper reflection on the journeys of all women artists—past, present, and future.

As an exhibition dedicated to Japanese collections, the exhibition contributes meaningfully to the Schaeffer Fine Arts Library's mission to support creative, reflective, and globally engaged research. It honours the evolving role of women in the art world, showing how artistic expression can shape and be shaped by scholarly inquiry.

From being labelled to self-naming

This theme reveals the discrimination Yoko Ono and Yayoi Kusama endured throughout their lives, alongside the broader cultural tendency to distort and diminish women artists through misnaming and reductive labels. Whether you are already aware of the insults these artists faced, or only familiar with their iconic reputations, this becomes the point of departure. To introduce their stories through such socially loaded language may seem almost “disgraceful,” yet this approach deliberately employs irony to provoke curiosity—and perhaps even reverse public assumptions about their legacies.

“To call someone Yoko Ono... is an insult?” — Lisa Carver

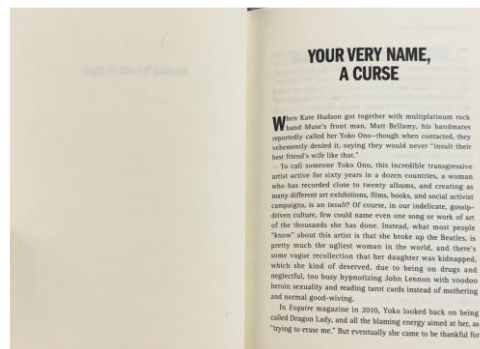
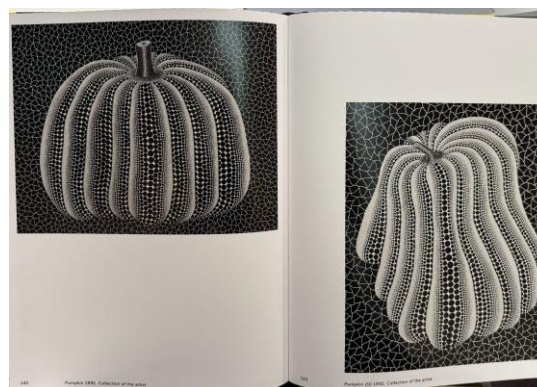


Figure 1. Reaching Out with No Hands: Reconsidering Yoko Ono (2012), pp.1.

“All I did was do what I liked... I am not concerned with whatever they want to say about me.” — Yayoi Kusama

Figure 2. Yayoi Kusama (2024), pp.142-143.



From being seen to seeing oneself

Using the body as a medium, Ono and Kusama reframe the female body not as an object to be viewed, but as a medium of agency and self-expression. Their works use the body as a site of sovereignty and a language of resistance.

Figure 3. *Yes Yoko Ono (2000), pp. 28–29.*

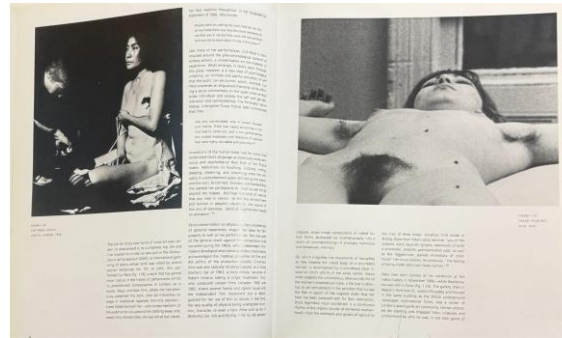


Figure 4. *Yayoi Kusama (2000), pp. 90-91.*



From oppression to resistance

Within societal and structural constraints, Ono and Kusama, distinct in their artistic approaches yet both identifying as female artists, use their practices to reclaim voice and agency under societal and structural constraints. Their works are not only expressions of selfhood but also acts of female resistance against both internal conflict and external pressure.

Figure 5. *Instruction Paintings (1995), pp. 13.*

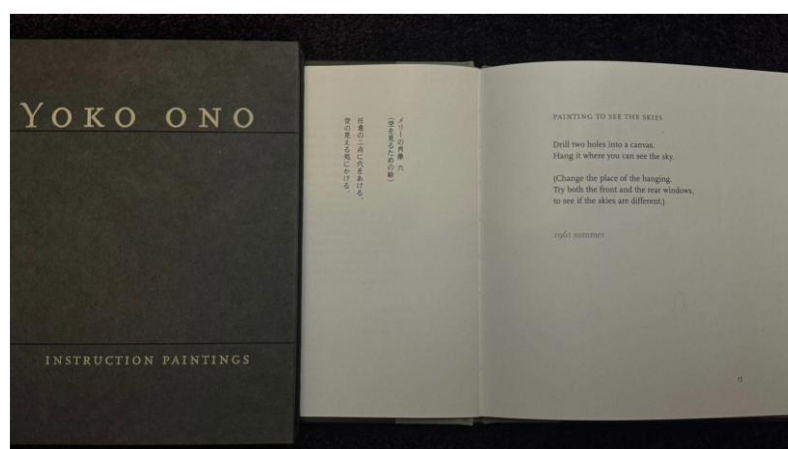
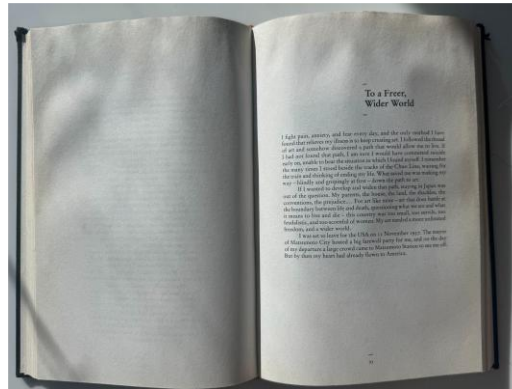


Figure 6. *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama* (2011), pp. 93.



From pain to the creation of space

You are invited to witness the visualisation of the artists' internal worlds and to experience each artwork as an extension of their state of mind. Every individual possesses a space of their own; yet here, space refers not only to the inner worlds of Ono and Kusama, but also to the external environments they inhabit. These internal and external spaces continuously influence one another. Both Ono and Kusama have experienced oppression, pain, acknowledgement, and honour from the external world, namely the communities they engage with, the societies they belong to, and the broader art world. Yet, rather than being silenced by these experiences, they transformed their external realities into sources of creation, fuelling their inner world and art expression.

Figure 7. *War is Over!* (2013), *Wish Tree*.

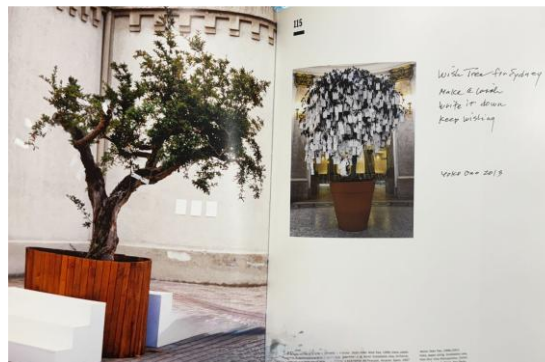


Figure 8. *Yayoi Kusama* (2012), *Infinity Mirror Room (Phalli's Field)*.



Scan the QR code to become part of the exhibition

