

## **PRE-POST MODERNISM: THE WAR IS OVER, if you want it: John & Yoko's Year of Peace 1969**

by Gregory Mansur

Enmeshed in the canons of art history's epistemology is the act of looking back for historical perspective. Encoded in this act is the hope of discovering a fresh perception of either an artists work or of a 'period' of production, and of returning to Plato's Cave with a greater clarity: a new perspective, a richer appreciation. Such a case can be made for returning to the year of 1969 and revisiting John Lennon and Yoko Ono's art project "Bed-IN" In doing so the post-modern philosophies of Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin resonate in the hyperbola of technological culture like a Times Square Jenny Holzer electronic menu board at noon "mainlining the dominant arteries and electronic organs of the mass communications apparatus with postmodern ironies and heady, linguistic estrangements. <sup>1</sup>"

John Lennon, popular to Western culture as a musician, and Yoko Ono, as an avant garde artist from New York, decided to use the media appeal that John was receiving from his years with the Beatles towards the promotion of global peace and love. To understand this praxis of sociological and phenomenological semiotics, is to understand the context of their times. 1969 was a time of social and political unrest: student uprisings in the US, France, and Germany; wars were being fought in Israel, Vietnam, Algeria, etc.; and the constant fear of nuclear annihilation by the then Soviet Union kept the cold war alive. In the previous year Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were both assassinated; the first a preacher of non-violence, the latter running for President on a platform of stopping the war. The idea of peace was merely a lamb in a world of wolves. John and Yoko wanted to talk about peace and they decided to use the over abundance of free media available to them to do it.

At the time, the media had signified John as a Beatle and Yoko as an avant garde artist. In 1969, after being denied visa's to the US, John and Yoko visited Canada to produce their Bed-IN. They moved from Toronto, Canada to Montreal, Canada, staying one week at each location, in a hotel room, in bed, with their message of peace. They invited the media and the media came from all over the world. When the media arrived John and Yoko spoke of peace and love. Their message was carried by the mass media, and their peace and love newsreel polemic was juxtaposed against the latest battle-protest-famine-cold war ethos footage of the day. Radio station DJ's set up shop in John and Yoko's hotel room, broadcasting live. John and Yoko took out full page newspaper ads, had billboards purchased, and had posters made reading "THE WAR IS OVER: if you want it. Happy Christmas from John and Yoko" and they had them placed in 11 cites: London, New York, LA, Rome, Tokyo, Paris, Barcelona, Montreal, Toronto, Berlin, and Amsterdam, simultaneously. They also produced a song that made it to the top of the pop charts "Give Peace a Chance."

The effect hoped for was to disrupt conventional oppositions between the youth 'hippies' and the 'establishment' by using 'establishment' mediums of advertising, newspaper,

billboards, posters, to 'sell' the youthful ideas of love and peace to a 'consuming' public. The billboards, newspaper ads and posters were meant to be found, stumbled upon while one is walking, driving, reading on the subway; found during ones daily routine. Such a result, if a result could have been measured, would have been in Walter Benjamin's thinking, a wrenching from it's commodified value into one of revolutionary value.

Post-modernism has left us with a language of signifiers, a landscape of signifieds, and a graveyard of signs with no base reality, and Baudrillard and Benjamin fault mass media and consumerism. "In Baudrillard's descriptive account of postmodern simulation, the McLuhanesque slogan that the medium is the message reaches an estranging, postmodern limit where the medium of telecommunication infiltrates, mimics, mutates, and finally exterminates the Real like a virus or genetic code, in what Baudrillard describes a global satellization of the real<sup>2</sup>." John Lennon knew the power of language, of words. His one comment "We're more popular than Jesus Christ" sent millions of kids and their brown-shirted parents into a record burning bonfired frenzy. He knew from experienced how loaded the word peace or the word love were, and that they had great signifying power. He knew that he, John Lennon, was signified as either a Beatle, a dirty hippy, a musician, a freak, a revolutionary, a communist, and he also knew that what mattered was for the audience to hear his message: "If people want to think we're freaks, we're freaks, if people want to think we're musicians, we're musicians. People project this identity onto us. I don't care. It's the message that counts."<sup>4</sup> But this was 1968 and far from post-modern or deconstruction aesthetics. Lennon and Ono were ahead of their time.

1968 was pre-post-modern. POP was still fashion of a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century art and a commodifying frenzy was gripping the ascots of the Nuevo York Rich, hungry to own the latest Pop-art-darlings work. The art world had yet to turn upon itself and begin canabilizing its old, worshipping the Corporate culture, the energy crisis was off the horizon, Leo Castillo was still king. The belief that something new was out there on the horizon, some untamed frontier yet to be discovered, was feeding the pre-Studio 54 cocaine frenzied intelligentsia into a full fisted Oxbow Incident, complete with a posses riding the shallow fly-over rivers, churning up the libidinal desires for the moneyed art monarchs of Gotham consumption.

Jennie Holzer knew this landscape and created for it. She created 'truism' which were clichéd slogans that she playfully deconstructs to reveal their platitudinous content. Her collection of "Truisms" are common predictable everyday messages conflicted with politicized or schizophrenic content. Nonsensical, parodic, and ideologically loaded, such clashing platitudes, mottos, and non sequiturs are meant of force the viewer into redefining the meaning behind the message. John Lennon was not interested in parodic or nonsensical conflicting interpretations. Too many people were dying in the world and he wanted the world to change: THE WAR IS OVER, if you want it. It was a polemic statement of fact, an 'actualization' of proletarian power, reminding the masses they have a choice in determining the outcome of a war. Lennon's use of the media to disseminate an idea within the channels of material consumption runs parallel to Holzer's. Both are a subversive act, an act of cultural intervention, for the discourse of advertising stands out as a ripe medium for the tactical subversion of dominant slogans and stereotypes.

Lennon was inserting the message of Peace among the messages of war. Holzer was to redefine the message and the medium. They both have a political edge that cuts into the semiological underbelly of everyday mechanical reproduction and into the heart of post modernisms spectacle.

Alas, as pre-post modern as Lennon-Ono were in their Bed-In's, their proletariat brothers and sisters were experiencing a deep narcotic post modern signification: through consumerism the masses had become in the prophetic words of Baudrillard, "a passive medium for the cultural simulation of every representable social need, libidinal desire, political interest, or popular opinion."<sup>3</sup> Lennon-Ono's statements for Peace were turned into cultural headlines, thirty-second commercials, cultural signifiers not of peace and love but in the words of Walter Benjamin, the cult of personality. What was being said was secondary to who was saying it. Peace and love was consumed as a textual representation of John Lennon, not his message. The media's focus was not on Peace or love but on John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono. The message was lost in signification. John Lennon's Peace Now was soon replaced by John Travolta's Saturday Night Fever, soon followed by Ivan Boesky's hit song "Greed is Good!" Luckily Jenny Holzer was entering art school and none of this was being lost on her.

1. Mainlining Postmodernism: Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and the Art of the Intervention by Walter Kalaidjian. Postmodern culture v.2 n.3 May 1992
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Year of Peace. Interview John Lennon DVD.