

11

YOKO ONO FANFICTION

owko69 (Owen G. Parry)

I would say that this writing is fanfiction, and that the writers and readers of this book constitute a fandom: a performance fandom. Or what if we re-imagine it as so? I want to deliberately draw relations between the amateur practice of writing fanfiction and the unpaid labour of critical writing because I think as affective inter-textual practices produced around a desired subject – in this case performance – they are related. The idea that fan works are solely subordinate or derivative works is reductive. As a form of archontic literature (via Derrida) or minor literature (via Deleuze and Guattari) these texts expand and transform an extant archive, at best through subversive, desiring intervention. I hope this is useful in considering where you might place my contribution in the book. I'm ultimately a fan of fans. Fans are my inspiration . . .

Prompt 1: Not very much happens in this performance at the Serpentine Gallery *Manifesto Marathon*. Or, the one in which everyone blames John Lennon for brainwashing Yoko and breaking up the fluxus movement.

Tags: #YokoOno #onocode #performance #art #fanfic #artworld #AU #manifesto #marathon #pregnantjohn #FanRiot

Yoko kept us waiting at the Serpentine Gallery outdoor pavilion in Hyde Park for almost an hour. We were all held in this temporary structure designed by the Canadian architect Frank Gehry, where the Manifesto Marathon was taking place over the course of a prematurely cold autumn weekend. Gallery stewards handed us little souvenir torches they called 'Ono-chord' with the initials Y.O engraved on them and informed us to wait for further instruction.

After much anticipation and checking the time on our phones, a diamond shaped light appeared in the sky over nearby Knightsbridge and we knew immediately it was Yoko. She was arriving by helicopter. The aircraft landed right next to the pavilion. A spotlight scanned the audience and landed on its door, which immediately swung open allowing Yoko to dis-mount in a Swarovski encrusted top hat and her signature glasses. The curator limped over



FIGURE 11.1 owko69, 2013.

to the aircraft with a big German smile, and what appeared to be a wooden leg. He greeted Yoko and took her straight to the stage. Then, with no introduction, and by her own accord, Yoko took out her little Onochord, and using Onocode (a colloquial language not unlike Morse-code, but developed across a span of more than fifty years of conceptual art practice) she gave us the instruction we had all been waiting for:

*I/ love/ you
flash/ flash flash/ flash flash flash*

We didn't know if Yoko really meant it, or whether she just wanted us to tell her that we loved her back, which we did anyway:

flash/ flash/ flash/ flash/ I/ love/ you/ Yokey-poo.

Then, just like that, Yoko hit play on the PA sound system and an unidentified drum and bass track began to thump through the speakers. I wasn't sure if it was a track from her

2008 'Yes, I'm a Witch' remix album, a remix of the outro or intro, or an entirely new track? It definitely resembled a snippet of a sound score she once used in her 1968 'Fly on my Bum' video – the one in which at 3.33 she walks into the frame wearing no. 7 American tan tights eating a stick of celery, and where John is continually stoned because this was pre- The Beatles' 'White Album', and after John's second pregnancy. In any case, there were definitely no tan tights and no celery in this performance.

Yoko climbed off the stage and proceeded to dance amongst us in the audience for the duration of the four-minute track. Everyone in the pavilion was trying to dance next to Yoko, who was dancing wildly for someone in her eighties who had just literally flown in. When the track ended, Yoko got back onto the stage, told us she loved us again in Onocode (which we had all by now fully acquired), and waited for us to reciprocate, which we all did.

Yoko Infinity
f/ash

We all loved Yoko, and then she got back into the helicopter, and continued flashing at us through the window on this starry night. We all stood there and watched her fly away with tears in our eyes and the wind from the propellers in our hairs . . .

Prompt 2: All the artists are critics, and all the critics are fans: Or, the one in which fanfiction and performance art become synonymous modes through which to re-write and expand upon extant artworks and question the authority of the archive.

Tags: #art #performance #fanfiction #RPF #OTP #rewriting #feminist #post-critical #Cagingham #Jenkins #Schneider #Linzy #Abramovic' #Brimfield #Deller #Whynot?

There has been little crossover between critical writing about performance and the amateur practice of fanfiction and real person fiction (RPF), despite an apparent overlap between the two in methodology and practice. The practice of re-writing (usually) popular media texts in fanfiction and re-enactment (usually) in performance histories are obvious points for comparison. Transformative acts of re-writing in fanfiction, of archiving and preservation in performance, collide in experimental approaches to its study and criticism. Performative writing/performance writing (Peggy Phelan), art writing (Maria Fusco) and conceptual writing (Kenneth Goldsmith) are exemplary of such modes. As artists, researchers, writers and teachers we constantly negotiate the shifts between roles and positions. Yet being a fan remains a constant (if sometimes secret and volatile) source of motivation across a field of creative and critical labour. As Chad Bennett writes 'Fan activities, [are] often private and marked by isolation, secrecy, and shame'.¹ Being a fan is often considered something we grow out of. Definitions of fans as 'characterized, influenced, or prompted by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm' (OED) or as mind-less consumers in Theodor Adorno's now outdated treatise on mass culture, have kept fans as pathologised figures across cultural history. With over-attachments and intense relationships with their subjects of fascination, fans are stereotyped as

‘stalkers’, ‘crazies’ and ‘kooks’.² So, what can be gained from taking up the position of fan of performance? And what might be gained from conceiving of the field of enquiry around performance as a fandom?

In some respect performativity has already been addressed in the scholarly field of fan studies through discussions on fan fictions that re-interpret, re-configure and give new life to official texts. If ‘fanfiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk’³ then this is often done by shifting power dynamics or character representations in the official text, by, for example, giving precedence to minorities, women, queers, and people of colour hitherto unsubstantiated in the official narrative. Or, indeed by expanding the timeline of a work; changing its mood or sensibility; or re-contextualising a work in an alternate universe (AU). Fan scholar Henry Jenkins claims that fan labour ‘typically involves not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism, and it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement’.⁴ Fans of Harry Potter or boy band One Direction create transformative works including fanfictions, videos, illustrations, memes, and music using those official, usually commercially driven texts and narratives to create their very own versions, whether that be a ‘curtain fic’ (or domestic fic) in which an enamoured Snape and Harry go shopping for curtains; a hurt/comfort fic (or death fic) where one band member, Louis, cares for the other band member, Harry, who has a terminal illness; or a One Direction/Harry Potter crossover in which Harry Potter is a performance artist and Harry Styles an art critic who ‘bodyswap’ to help each other out of ‘sticky’ situations. There are infinite possibilities for re-working popular texts in fanfiction, but like much writing about art and performance, most of the writing focuses on relationships, especially between fictional characters or artists in RPF. The romance genre is thus the most popular, and includes specialist tropes such as ‘shipping’ (putting characters into relationships) and ‘one true pairing’ (OTP), a fan’s favourite romantic pairing or ‘ship’. Shipping becomes a method through which fans can re-imagine and create multiple different narratives out of the source material.

Artists’ relationships have always been a point of fascination and curiosity for me. My very first encounter with performance art was through a piece of writing by Cynthia Carr titled ‘A Great Wall’ (1989). This document re-tells the story of Marina Abramovic’ and Ulay’s *The Lovers* (1988) – their final epic performance walking towards each other from either ends of the Great Wall of China, crossing treacherous landscapes and warzones, until finally, they meet somewhere in the middle and end their relationship. On reading this as a first-year undergrad in 2001, I remember feeling the breadth and scale of this performance – a relationship of dramatic proportions played out and made visible to audiences across a landmark visible from outer space. I remember Lois Weaver, the teacher who gave us that text to read. I remember Lois on another occasion introducing us to her life-long collaborator Peggy Shaw (the couple formed *Split Britches* with Deb Margolin in 1980), and her alter ego persona Tammy Whynot? – ‘a Southern Baptist Country

and Western Singer turned Lesbian Feminist Performance Artist'. I remember not knowing what a performance artist was, never mind a Lesbian-Feminist one. I remember not worrying about the truth or facts of many of Lois/Tammy's stories or the texts she gave us to read as she had begun the class with an activity: 'Ask me anything you like, any question and I will endeavour to answer it', she said. 'If I can't, or don't want to answer it, I will make it up.' This was perhaps my first valuable lesson on the instability and potential transformation of performance, identity and the archive.

Across art history, artist pairings and collectives become sites for domestic or romantic subtext and spectator intervention, and fantasy becomes an opportunity for re-working the source material. I remember reading somewhere John Cage's commentary on his relationship with the minimalist choreographer Merce Cunningham: 'I do the cooking and Merce does the dishes', and how this somewhat insignificant insight into their domestic life opened up a myriad other relations to the artists and their respective oeuvres. I wrote a Cagingham fanfic all about it and about homonormativity and published it in *The New Inquiry*⁵ and on fanfiction.net (owko69 2015b). There is an abundance of artist pairings across performance histories ripe for the picking: from Yoko Ono and John Lennon, to Björk and Mathew Barney. Notably, both these pairings ended up having extensive impact on each other's artistic work. But besides 'shipping' what are the more specific methods that relate fanfiction to performance and writing about performance?

In his now canonical *Textual Poachers* Henry Jenkins describes how fans use existing media texts like 'silly putty', moulding them into all kinds of new re-configurations. Everything is allowed in the expanding universes of fanfiction; however, RPF is definitely the most controversial because of the ethical implications of writing about real people. In her essay 'Fans of Feminism', Catherine Grant expands on Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* to specifically explore the re-writing of second-wave feminism in contemporary art practice. Discussing the artist as critic, historian and fan, Grant considers the instability or rather interchangeability of the fan as a sympathetic mode through which to read and make feminist art, and in particular feminist performance. I would like to extend Grant's observations here to think more specifically about doing and writing about performance.

Re-enactment has been given much attention in performance studies and visual cultures over the past decade or so with a number of books, exhibitions and performances dedicated to the subject. There are multiple examples of re-writing and re-enactment across performance histories that tend towards both extremes: from precise replications to the parodic and absurd. In her book *Performance Remains* (2011), Rebecca Schneider examines performance itself as archival turning to historical battle re-enactments as her example, an amateur activity where enthused groups convene to cosplay and re-stage those historic events through precise game-like structures. In Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005), the artist re-enacts the works of seven iconic performances (by predominantly white, cis, men from the Western canon), transforming the works by inserting herself

into those extant, yet perhaps at the time insufficiently documented performance histories. In Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgrave* (2001), the artist re-creates the events of the miner's strikes at the Northern British town of Orgrave during the Thatcherite era involving many participants present at the original 1984 protest. In a series of works titled *This is Performance Art* (2011) artist Mel Brimfield re-mixes canonical histories of performance art with skits from Saturday night popular television entertainment, where comedic TV personalities Morecambe and Wise are interchanged with artist duo Gilbert and George to create a parodic commentary on distinctions of value and authority across these disparate genres. In the video series *Conversations wit de Churen II – V* (2003–2006), Kalup Linzy creates video vignettes fuelled by American television soap operas such as *All My Children* and *The Days of Our Lives*, making pointed commentaries about race, class and sexuality through 'odd juxtapositions'. Linzy's work perhaps best exemplifies a mode of fannish investment, as one article points out: 'ripe for parody . . . Kalup Linzy . . . maintains an unexpected sincerity while emulating the daytime television drama'.⁶ Shifting beyond precise replication or re-enactment, but also the critical cynicism of postmodern parody, Linzy's work expresses both a desire and affection for the TV series as it stands in its imperfection, as well as a desire to rework it. Linzy's unstable position bears a striking resemblance to the interchangeable fan figured in Grant's essay, and as Meyer and Tucker point out: 'while some fans certainly do position their acts as sites of resistance, others simply express a deep affection or desire for particular media texts'.⁷ Renouncing the singular authority of a source text or identity, the fan's work thus becomes difficult to categorise. Beyond this fanfiction, fan cultures have become an inspiration in my broader artistic practice. *Fan Riot* (fanriot.tumblr.com, 2015) is an ongoing project, which includes an itinerant fan club series (four thus far at Artsadmin, Jerwood Space and Chisenhale Dance Space) with invited artists and fans, workshops, publications including a zine created by and for fans of Live Art (owko69 2015a), and a number of commissioned artworks and performances including *TYOTA: The Yoko Ono Tribute Akt* (2015).

Asserting oneself as fan means to assert a certain subjective relation that almost always beckons judgement. For too long critics like Jason Guriel, who wrote 'I Don't Care about Your Life: Why Critics Need to Stop Getting Personal in Their Essays' (2016) have sought to shut down personal relations, without acknowledging their always burgeoning presence, if only as a means of motivating and sustaining one's interest or critical practice. So, instead of concealing personal desire, what if we expose it and speed it up? Through fannish investment subjective relations become common relations. When accelerated to the point of abstraction and delusion, they also break to become multiple or transparent again – just like Ono's flash – which reminds me of Walter Benjamin's theory on memory figuring through a flash, or the 'means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up'.⁸ In Ono's performance and my fanfiction the flash not only seizes hold of a memory or transforms it, but also says:

You're imperfect/ I love you

Fandom comes into being through this multiplicity, through a simultaneous affection, dissatisfaction and desire to transform and re-work existing narratives. It extends a work, rather than capturing it. It opens to the possibility of collective or common investment, embodiment and infinite remediation. So, on writing about performance, boy bands or conceptual artists we love or want to love, we take a stance as fan and invite others to do the same.

Notes

- 1 Bennett (2010: 18).
- 2 Jenkins (1992: 11).
- 3 Harmon (1997).
- 4 Jenkins (1992: 23).
- 5 Parry (2015).
- 6 Taft (2006).
- 7 Meyer and Tucker (2007: 115).
- 8 Benjamin (1940: Thesis VI).

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