

The Working Glamour

John Lennon, Yoko Ono:

Bed-In

Amsterdam und Montreal,
March and May 1969.

by Andreas Rumpfhuber

Second Act: Recurrence

Late evening on 26 May 1969: a young couple, followed by an entourage of managers, camera-teams, photographers and journalists, enters their hotel-room in Queen Elisabeth Hotel in Montreal. Both are dressed completely in white. The young couple are the 36-year-old Japanese artist and avant-garde musician Yoko Ono and the 29-year-old English musician John Lennon. For a week they will work for peace and will repeat the format of their honeymoon two months before at the Amsterdam Hilton hotel: the Bed-In. Originally the second week of peace activism was planned to be in New York. But the U.S. authorities refused John Lennon a visa.¹ So the couple intended to stage the Bed-In first in the Bahamas, but after a night in unbearable heat, they decided to give it a try in liberal Canada. They needed to take a stopover at the King Edward hotel in Toronto, to wait for visa, but could finally travel on to Montreal, where they would enter room 1742 of the famous, luxurious Hilton grand-hotel Queen Elisabeth.

From Monday, 26th May until Sunday, 1st June 1969 John Lennon and Yoko Ono work publicly in bed. From there they are present in all of North America, are ON AIR. They give interviews via telephone, welcome guests from their bed and work in dense spatial conditions for their mission: Peace for the world. The famous psychologist Timothy Leary and his wife Rosmary, the Canadian rabbi and peace activist Abraham Feinberg and others visit the two. Late Saturday evening, the day before they leave, the world-famous song Give Peace a Chance is recorded in the rearranged and adapted hotel room: The king-sized bed is positioned centrally at



the huge panorama window that would frame the vista like a theatre stage behind the big cushions. Flowers are placed on the wooden board at the window, both slogans of the Bed-In are scribbled on slips of paper and pinned to the window behind the bed. Like in Amsterdam we read: “Bed Peace”, “Hair Peace”. To the left as well as to the right self-made posters are hung up. “I love Yoko”. “I love John”. Drawings by Yoko Ono’s daughter Kyoko next to drawings done by John Lennon. A guitar leans on the wall. A telephone is placed to the right of the bed. Spotlights are mounted above the bed. Additional spots are installed to the left and the right. The local disk jockey Chuck Chandler sets up his studio up in the room, Canadian and other private camera teams, photographers and journalists are present.

The performance in the hotel bed was initially planned to be without script, like an open work of art. In its first version of appropriating the hegemonic space of the hotel in Amsterdam, the roles of the young couple were undecided and open, thus caused confusion. Both Yoko Ono and John Lennon gave interviews, were partners on an equal footing, both with different opinions, different explanations and messages. Journalists were irritated and confused and did not know how to interpret this kind of activism. Headlines like “Married Couple are in Bed”, or “They are getting up today” are clear accounts of the disorientation. In its iteration in Montreal the Canadian Television Corporation (CBC) took over to choreograph the Bed-In for its TV-series The Way It Is. The broadcasting corporation used the format of the Bed-In and invited guests, such as the ultra-conservative comic-strip artist Al Capp, or the comedian and civil-rights activist Dick Gregory, to come and

talk to John Lennon and Yoko Ono at their bedside. Thus in the CBS broadcast, the guests – as well as the hosts – were assigned specific, traditional roles that ultimately became part of the Bed-In myth: The angry, male hero (John Lennon) – maybe a bit naïve, but still very serious and with a lot of attachment, campaigning for world-peace, then the devoted and loyal wife of the hero (Yoko Ono), who would quietly – quasi voicelessly – adore her husband, and finally you would have – for example – the brutal, heart-less, ultra-conservative provocateur and bad guy (Al Capp), who would argue that both the musician and his artist wife only staged this performance in order to earn a lot of money: “I write my cartoons for money. Just as you would sing your songs. Exactly the same reason. ... And much of the same reason this is happening too, if the truth is told.”² Entering the room, wearing a dark suit, similar to a marine corps uniform, he approached the bed limping, his right hand outstretched and saying, totally self-deprecatingly and knowing his role: “Dreadful, Neanderthal old fascist. ... How do you do?”³

The Bed-In is a kind of entrepreneurial performance of John Lennon and Yoko Ono that was staged as a symbolic act. They appropriate the glamorous grand hotel typology and – seen from today – they would prophetically foresee a contemporary working condition. For me the Bed-In is a kind of mould for contemporary working formats. As I will argue, it is a foil for a life in which working in bed and from the hotel, as the outmost fantasy of a worker – as a kind of extreme fiction and phantasma of freedom and emancipation from work – is slowly becoming reality today and is shifting its meaning. It is a life in which work, spare time and life are increasingly becoming one and the same thing, in which ‘toppling’ moments come about that stake a boundless spatial claim and its confined redemption.

Hybrid Workspace: Grand Hotel

In the production of the Bed-In, space for living and space for working converge: The Bed-In is not staged in a theatre, or in a stadium, nor was it arranged and installed in an art museum or a gallery. Rather it takes place in the spaces that John Lennon and Yoko Ono live in. The spatial framing differs from the art-spaces of Yoko Ono’s practice, it differs from the music-studio in which both of them would be used to work in, nor is it the stage – which are all traditionally separated from the function of living. Now their daily space of living, their habitat becomes the space of work. They live in their performance (work) space and they work in the space they live in: next to meeting with journalists, holding press conferences and giving interviews on the telephone, both Yoko Ono and John Lennon live in these rooms, they sleep there and they eat there.

The hotel rooms in Amsterdam, at the Queen Elisabeth in Montreal, at the Sheraton Hotel at the Bahamas or at the stopover at the Hotel in Toronto, the Hamilton Palace Hotel at Hyde Park Corner in London are home to the two stars around the time they were married, but also the places between London, Paris, Gibraltar, Paris, Amsterdam, Vienna, London, Bahamas, Toronto, Montreal,

Ottawa, London, all airports, gangways and waiting lounges, their limousines and airplanes – in 1969 still glamorous and exclusive spaces – are part of a vast, sheer endless spatial continuum in which both live and work. This continuum is emphasized even more strongly by the official imagery and all the documentaries that are available today. Takes and images from Amsterdam, Montreal, Toronto or the Bahamas – in which most of the time one would only see a close-up of the two faces – are used interchangeably. As if timeless and spaceless, they are collaged in a way to tell a specific story, i.e., tell the Lennon myth that was coined by CBC.

“Each of our hotels is a little America”⁴ is the clear and paradigmatic concept of Hilton Hotel Corporation, in which both of the Bed-In Performances were staged. All of the hotels that are used by Lennon and Ono are modern Grand Hotels, a kind of American-style luxury hotel, which is conceived as democratic architecture machine, and is a symbol of a free and peaceful world in the imagination of an U.S. citizen – it is an open, transparent and capitalist society. These modern luxury hotels were all built in post-war years in International Style, they are all cool modernist buildings: clearly legible concrete structures, big windows and thematically designed interior spheres, exclusive restaurants and shopping malls.

Analogous to the Clubs in London, for example Boodle’s (1762) or the Athenæum Club (1824), the grand hotels frame an ideal bourgeois mode of work. They are understood as exclusive places of spare time of the newly established bourgeoisie, of entrepreneurs, doctors, academics, but also artists and writers. Still, such a reading ignores the discursive bourgeois concept of work that is understood as a place for the subjective pursuit for happiness. Work that produces values⁵ is the application of knowledge and the exchange of goods and services. Clubs, but also grand hotels offer a representative space for grouping a multitude of productive activity, something that one calls networking today. In this sense Boodle’s and the Athenæum, but grand hotels also impressively explicate a space in which people are synchronised to become productive for a common goal.

The American-style luxury hotels, are modernist modulations of the grand hotel which at the end of the 19th century functioned as colonial outposts in a global network of railways, in order to pursue worldwide commerce. The Hilton Hotels were similar to the impressive grand hotels at the turn of the century, as for example the Grand Hotel in Singapore (1887) and the one in Bombay (1904) that have been conceived as outposts for forging trade, or the Palast Hotel (1897) and the Grand Hotel (1905) both in St. Moritz, Switzerland, that targeted an Anglophile, royal audience and a predominantly Jewish upper class, that was always understood as workplace for the travelling merchant.

The spaces of these modern Grand Hotels, in which the Bed-In was staged, establish an exclusively private interior for an exclusive upper class. Access is granted to those who can afford to pay.⁶ The space itself constitutes an intimate space of personal and private relations, a kind of second living room that offers a public character in

which all members are permanently visible.

Artistic Framing: “To Assimilate Art in Life”⁷

Significant for the Bed-In is the artistic practice of Yoko Ono. Without her, without the conceptual framing and her idea about art, and without the participatory aspects of her poetic practice, without her work on and with rules and instructions that would culminate in her performative practice, the stagings in Amsterdam and in Montreal would have looked different.

In a small text, entitled To the Wesleyan People,⁸ which Yoko Ono understood as a footnote to a lecture she was to have delivered on 13 January 1966 at Wesleyan University, she explicitly describes her artistic strategy. To Yoko Ono, art might offer the absence of complexity of an everyday, of a daily grind, that would ultimately lead to complete relaxation of the mind:

“The mind is omnipresent, events in life never happen alone and the history is forever increasing its volume. The natural state of life and mind is complexity. At this point, what art can offer (if it can at all – to me it seems) is an absence of complexity, a vacuum through which you are led to a state of complete relaxation of mind.”⁹

This artistic option, Ono writes, is an event bent. It is an everyday experience, everyday occurrence that art might possibly bend, in order to free the mind of a multitude of sensorial ideas, pre-conceptions, expectations. A liberation, as she postulates, which only each individual is able to experience voluntarily for herself or himself. The work of art is only the framing of a situation that would initiate the experience. The end of such an involvement is thus contingent and ambiguous, since the whole process happens without a script.

To Yoko Ono the event is an act involving oneself. She spans the frame for a solipsist experience, that cannot be communicated in the very moment of involvement. Her art produces a time span of wonderment that each one can extend or stop whenever he or she feels to do so. “After that you may return to the complexity of life again, it may not be the same, or it may be, or you may never return, but this is your problem ...”¹⁰ Only afterwards, after this very specific experience can one relate the art piece to the everyday.

The openness of Yoko Ono’s works, that only appears due to the participation and interpretation of the audience. A moment that is immanent in Ono’s instruction pieces but also in her performance work: She questions the impossible iteration, the obnoxious repetition of a subjective experience. Works like the famous Cut Piece performance¹¹, as well as the Instruction Pieces¹² have an effect on the concept of the Bed-In. It was the performance’s mottoes – Stay in Bed, Grow your Hair – that would act as instructions for Bed Peace and Hair Peace. But it is also the distinct, passive and neutral attitude of the musician and the artist, that – especially in the

first version of the Bed-In – is not imitating life, but integrates itself as an art form into life. As an autonomous sphere, it changes perceptions and conceptions that withdraw from a production of surplus value.

Contours of an Exhausting, Creative, Entrepreneurial Practice

As a second significant attribute of the Bed-In one needs to consider John Lennon’s practice as an autonomous, responsible entrepreneurial subject. In November 1963 John Lennon performed with the Beatles at the Royal Variety Performance – at the time still as a normal citizen of the British Empire. With Queen Elisabeth II in attendance, John Lennon asks – politely and certainly rehearsed – for help: “For our last number I’d like to ask your help: Will the people in the cheaper seats clap your hands? And the rest of you, if you’ll just rattle your jewellery ...”

Some years later, after having toured around in the world, playing in front of thousands of hysteric fans, but also being attached to some of the emancipation movements of the 1960s, John Lennon considers himself self-determined. With his attitude (Walter Benjamin¹³) he no longer wants to follow traditional conventions, or even worse, subordinate to the monarch. On the contrary: in 1966, in an interview with the Evening Standard, Lennon compares his popularity with that of Jesus. At the beginning of 1969 he breaks the bounds to the English Empire by sending back his MBE (Member of the British Empire). Around that time he also starts his solo career and his collaboration with Yoko Ono – his second wife.

John Lennon is not so much Working Class Hero – in its traditional sense – who rebels against the system, as some biographers would have it. Instead he has the contours of a new type of worker, who one can call (using the German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling’s term) the enterprising self.¹⁴ John Lennon is creative and he is entrepreneurial; he is active and self-employed, he is innovative and he uses imaginary chances of winning, he bears the risk of his enterprise and he works closely with his wife. He campaigns explicitly for the peace movement and consciously uses his media proficiency. In an interview Lennon would retrospectively speak about his entrepreneurial account of the Bed-In:

“Yoko and I, when we got together, decided, whatever we knew, whatever we did, was gonna be in the paper. [...] Whatever people like us to do ... it’s gonna be in the papers. So we decided to utilize the space we would occupy anyway by getting married with a commercial for peace”¹⁵

Often-forgotten images of the first Bed-In in Amsterdam show the young couple in an over-sized bed. They lay there peaceful and somehow lost. Here the first contours of a phenomenon become visible that the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg calls the exhausted self.¹⁶ Having pulled the blanket up to their chins amidst the bleak Hilton decoration, both look rather exhausted and worn out, something that also The ballad of John and Yoko would corroborate. John Lennon

recorded the song, shortly after returning home to London after the first Bed-In in Amsterdam:

*Drove from Paris to the Amsterdam Hilton
Talking in our beds for a week
The newspeople said
“Say, what’re you doing in bed?”
I said, “We’re only trying to get us some peace”*

The last line of the song ... to get us some peace ... could mean two things. I can read it – following the intention of peace activism – as a wish to get peace in the world. Otherwise the song line might also mean that Lennon and his wife crave for some peace and quiet. The one is the uncontested interpretation of a prevalent narration about the powerful work for peace through refusal. The other interpretation emphasizes the downside of a self-determined acting subject: the exhaustion, the wish for no conflicts and for harmony, as well as the personal will for peace and quietness. Taking on this perspective this last song line, but as well as the forgotten images, show the other dimension of a self-authorized, hard-working entrepreneur.

It is the latent exhaustion which can become a depression that Alain Ehrenberg connects to the disappearing borderers and boundaries – between the permitted and the prohibited, between the possibility and the impossibility – that challenges the psychic order of every individual, that alters, irritates and psychologically exhausts the subject.¹⁷

The Art Commercial and its Spatial Appropriation

During the days in Amsterdam, the initially neutral, even the passive setting of the Bed-In changes towards active work for their concern: world peace. The use of the room changes totally – both furnish and re-arrange the hotel-room: the bed is placed at the panorama window, flowers are brought in, Bed-In instructions written in block-letters and – to all visible – pinned up at the window and on walls: Stay in Bed. Grow your Hair – Hair Peace, Bed-Peace.

Here and a month later when repeating the Bed-In in Montreal, John Lennon and Yoko Ono stage their staying-in-bed as a commercial for an alternative way of living. They appropriate the bourgeoisie typology of the Grand Hotel, the figure of the monarch in bed. In doing so, John Lennon sells peace like soap: “And you gonna sell and sell and sell until the housewife thinks: Oh well ... Peace or war ... these are the two products”¹⁸ Permanently and obtrusive ...

“Peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, Peace in your mind ... Peace on earth ... Peace at home ... Peace at work ...”¹⁹

Is the Bed-In a commercial with artistic means or an artistic performance with means of a commercial? It is a commercial that uses the framing of Yoko Ono’s

artistic practice and it is an Instruction Piece whose instruction so are unambiguous and simplistic, that they are understood everywhere: “Stay in bed. Grow your hair. Bed peace. Hair peace. Hair peace, Bed peace”²⁰ The utopian place of such a practice is the bed: in bed the absolutist king as centre of the world would hold court and in bed here the Biedermeier artist-poet Carl Spitzweg works, dreaming up his poetic fantasies. To stay in bed means to be free, at least not to need to go to work every day ...

In its specific use, the bed is the place of utmost convergence of work and life. Both accept the construction of the bourgeois space and appropriate, in a double affirmation, the space of containment – the space of subtle control, of prudential standards and of disciplined life.

By spatially re-configuring the hotel room, and with their specific use of the space, they appropriate the American-style luxury hotel, they re-program the neutral infrastructure of the hotel – the space receives a different direction, a new meaning.

The spatial practice of John Lennon and Yoko Ono is not interested in a kind of truth or in an essence of architecture. In the given situation, Lennon and Ono are interested in creating an alternative way of living that withdraws from prevailing ideas of how to live: John Lennon and Yoko Ono appropriate the hybrid space of the grand hotel. They affirm the hegemonic space of an exclusive society, its public character, and its transparent architecture, as well as the practice of bourgeois production – the conversation, in order to produce their own unsettling performance. They refigure the familiar space of the glamorous establishment for a moment as a utopia of retreat, as symbol for another society. To them, the direction-less, bound-less, neutral – quasi feature-less, property-less – space, the public character of the hotel, the convergence of life and work, but also their own autonomy and their newly found responsibility in life, form a quality. At the same time, it is a challenge that they are attempting by double-affirmation – in terms of Gille Deleuze’s Nietzsche – in order to design a new form of living and being together.

Even though it fails when CBC embraces the format and “topples” it, creating the mould – so to speak – for contemporary, neo-liberal working formats, that I call the working glamour, which we all live today: a work-life where the outmost fantasy of a worker – to work from the hotel, to work in bed, has become reality. A reality that allows in some respect of course freedom and emancipation, but at the same time brings about different social as well as spatial problems. In other words: Its not that borders and disciplinarity disappear, but took on different forms and formats.

Andreas Rumpfhuber is an architect and researcher living in Vienna, Austria. He holds a PhD from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture, in Copenhagen. His dissertation entitled “architecture of immaterial labour” will be published in 2010.

NOTES:

- 1 A year earlier John Lennon had been found guilty in London of possession of marijuana. The U.S. government used this as an excuse to deny him a visa.
- 2 John and Yoko's Year of Peace (DVD), Paul McGrath (director), Alan Lysaght (producer), Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2000, timecode: 17:42
- 3 John and Yoko's Year of Peace (DVD), Paul McGrath (director), Alan Lysaght (producer), Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2000, timecode: 17:35
- 4 Conrad Hilton: Be my Guest, quoted in: Annabel Jane Wharton: Building the Cold War, Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London: 2001, p. 1
- 5 Cf. for example the writings of a member of Boodle's – the Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith.
- 6 One only had access to some clubs if an active member signalled his or her support. Marc Augé attributes the same to contemporary non-places. Cf.: Marc Augé: Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, Verso, London-New York, 1995
- 7 Yoko Ono: To the Wesleyan People, in: Kristine Stiles, Peter Selz (eds.): Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art, A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1996, pp. 736-739. First published in: Yoko Ono: Grapefruit, Wunternaum Press, Tokyo: 1974
- 8 Yoko Ono: To the Wesleyan People, in: Kristine Stiles, Peter Selz (eds.): Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art, A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1996, pp. 736-739.
- 9 *ibid*: p. 739
- 10 Cf.: Yoko Ono quoted in: Emily Wasserman: Yoko Ono at Syracuse "This is not here", in: Artforum, 10 June 1972, pp. 69-73
- 11 performed in 1964 at the Yamaichi Hall in Kyoto as part of the program Contemporary American Avant-Garde Music Concert: Insound and Instructure, afterwards she would perform it at Shogetsu Art Centre in Tokyo (1965), then at Carnegie Hall in New York.
- 12 For example see: Yoko Ono: Grapefruit, first edition, Wunternaum Press, Tokyo: 1964; second edition: Verlag Simon und Schuster, New York: 1970
- 13 I introduce the term attitude with Walter Benjamin in the first part of the German version, but was not able to grasp it in English without a proper translation – thus left it out for the time being.
- 14 Cf. Ulrich Bröckling: Das unternehmerische Selbst, Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 2007, particularly chapter 3.2.
- 15 John Lennon: Imagine (DVD), Andrew Solt (director), David L. Wolper (producer), Warner Home Video, 2005, timecode: 52:57
- 16 Cf. Alain Ehrenberg: Das erschöpfte Selbst, Depression und Gesellschaft in der Gegenwart, CampusVerlag, Frankfurt-New York: 2004 (French original version: 1998)
- 17 Cf. Alain Ehrenberg: Das erschöpfte Selbst, Depression und Gesellschaft in der Gegenwart, CampusVerlag, Frankfurt-New York: 2004; French original: 1998), p. 9
- 18 The U.S. vs. John Lennon (DVD), David Leaf, John Scheinfeld (Directors), 2006, timecode: 22:07
- 19 The U.S. vs. John Lennon (DVD), David Leaf, John Scheinfeld (Directors), 2006, timecode: 22:15
- 20 The U.S. vs. John Lennon (DVD), David Leaf, John Scheinfeld (Directors), 2006, Timecode: 23:30