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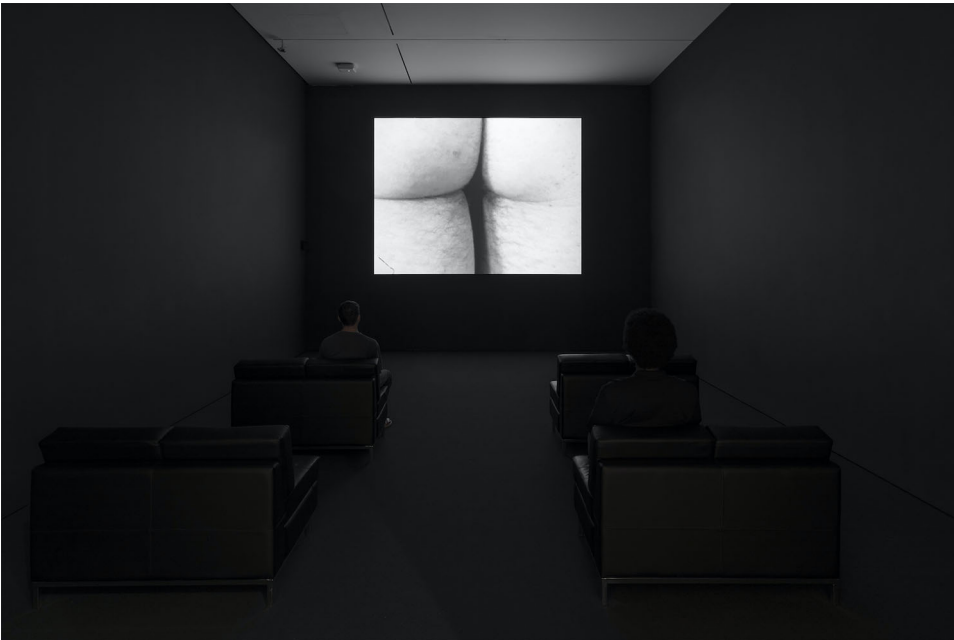
## Perplexity and Anti-Vietnam War Protest in Yoko Ono's *Film No. 4*

**ABSTRACT** During the 1960s, American artists and activists responded to the Vietnam War's violence with a variety of polemical forms including op-eds, marches, sit-ins, performative re-enactments, and takeovers of media outlets. In contrast to these conventional forms of protest and media intervention, artist and activist Yoko Ono's 1966 *Film No. 4* (also known as *Bottoms*), which the artist called a "petition for peace," presents a sequence of human buttocks in the act of walking on a treadmill. The levity of the film's content (i.e., butts) and the gravity of the artist's intentions for it (i.e., a call for peace at the height of the Vietnam War) registers as an absurd contradiction. This article examines how Ono's unconventional form of protest signaled a shift from the autonomy of abstract painting toward dematerialized art's participatory investments and de-hierarchized modes of critique. Through its filmic self-reflexivity and its aesthetics of perplexity—achieved through the constraining film production device of the treadmill and played out in the film's voice-over and media responses to the work—Ono's *Film No. 4* presents conceptualist humor as a strategy for navigating institutional power that acknowledges the limits of artistic ability to make material changes while also implicating viewers as participants in the United States' intervention in Vietnam. Social and cultural orders that discipline racialized and gendered subjects and maintain capitalist, imperialist white supremacy are confounded by *Film No. 4*.

**KEYWORDS** aesthetics, anti-Vietnam War art, protest art, Yoko Ono, perplexity

On view from October 2022 to October 2023 in a gallery at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, artist and activist Yoko Ono's *Film No. 4* (also known as *Bottoms*) from 1966–67 presents an eighty-minute sequence of tightly framed human buttocks. Accompanying the visual representation of butts are voice-overs narrated by participants in the film, who describe their experience walking in front of the camera, contemplating the meaning of the artwork. Their assessments and observations express a range of affects and judgements, including boredom, intrigue, skepticism, and admiration. At one point, the narration equivocates: "I understand, I think." Minutes later, another voice in the narration asks, "Are they just taking pictures of asses? Is that the whole bit?" Different voices come in: "You don't know what the film is about at all? It is bare behinds walking, one after the other. And that's all. And that's all!" Later, the voice-over states, "I'm not quite with her, what she's trying to get over."<sup>1</sup> As unsynchronized sound recordings, the verbalized reactions do not necessarily correspond to the person whose rear appears on screen. Rather, segments of the audio repeat over different sets of cheeks, creating

1. All transcriptions of the audio in *Film No. 4* are the author's own, based on repeated listenings. I made my best effort to accurately transcribe the audio. Any misheard lines might be suggestive of the perplexity generated by the film.



Installation view of “Yoko Ono’s *Bottoms*” in the exhibition *Collection 1940s–1970s*, Museum of Modern Art, October 7, 2022–October 30, 2023; photograph by Robert Gerhardt; © Yoko Ono; digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

associations between bodies and recurring claims that note the silliness, grotesquery, genius, or absurdity of the experience of walking for the camera and of considering the film’s concept. Over the course of its duration, the voice-over in Ono’s film calls attention to its perplexing effects and mode of production, seeding doubt and uncertainty for viewers.

Ono created a treadmill for use in the production of *Film No. 4*. The device consisted of a large circular platform set on ball bearings. Its precarious construction and the bodily precarity it produced was evinced in the vertical posts capped with horizontal bars, apparently made of wood, which participants in Ono’s film used to stabilize themselves in the act of walking. In a statement titled “On *Film No. 4* (In Taking the Bottoms of 365 Saints of Our Time),” written in the spring of 1967 and circulated in the program for the film’s premiere at the Jacey-Tatler Cinema in London in August 1967, Ono declared the intentions for her film: “This film, in fact, is like an aimless petition signed by people with their anuses. Next time we wish to make an appeal, we should send this film as the signature list.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, one of Ono’s film scripts, published in pamphlet form along with several other scores in 1968, suggests the film was the result of a simple instruction: “String bottoms together in place of signatures for petition for peace.”<sup>3</sup>

2. Yoko Ono, *Program for first London screening of No. 4* (1967); mimeograph on stapled paper from the collection of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

3. Wunternau Press in Tokyo originally published Ono’s book *Grapefruit* in 1964, and it was later reprinted by Simon & Schuster in 1970 and by Sphere Books in 1971. Scott MacDonald notes that there is uncertainty surrounding whether Ono wrote the film score before making *Film No. 4*. He writes, “By the time the film script



Production photograph from Yoko Ono's *Film No. 4 (Bottoms)* (1966).

The contradiction between the levity of the film's content (i.e., simply butts) and the gravity of the artist's intentions for it (i.e., a call for peace at the height of the Vietnam War) raises the question of how bottoms constitute a protest. How could Ono's film and the process of its production act as a collective document demanding the end of war? The artist's stated aimlessness of the petition, which also calls explicitly for peace, registers as a contradiction. If a petition is a collective document that appeals to an authority, what authority (or authorities) does this absurd document appeal to? For what does the film-as-petition advocate, and how? Absurdly, Ono's film purposefully raises questions without offering clarity. It perplexes viewers, engaging them through the absurdity of the apparent mismatch between its purpose and its form.

This article takes seriously Ono's intentions for the film to serve as a petition that anyone might sign. And while Ono's statements about the film prompt my own historical inquiry, I do not aim to ascribe a utopian effectiveness to Ono's work based solely on her intentions. Indeed, this article does not seek to demonstrate that Ono's film brought about events or policies that directly resulted in the de-escalation of the Vietnam War. Rather, mine is the first art historical analysis to perform a close reading of both the film's sound and visual aspects as well as the treadmill used in its production. In so doing,

'Film No. 4 Bottoms' was copyrighted as part of 'Thirteen Film Scores' in 1968, two versions of the film described had already been made: *No. 4* [1966], which was included in *Fluxfilm Program*, coordinated by George Maciunas, and a feature version, *No. 4 (Bottoms)* [1966]." Scott MacDonald, "Yoko Ono," in *Screen Writings: Texts and Scripts from Independent Films* (University of California Press, 1995), 15 and 22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.8501155.5>.

I recenter Ono's film as an artwork functioning as perplexing anti-Vietnam War activism. Engaging art historical and affect theories of absurdity, inscrutability, and inconvenience, I define perplexity as an aesthetic that problematizes autonomy—both of the art object and the political subject. I then situate the film in relation to Ono's larger conceptualist and activist practices, drawing upon art historians Midori Yoshimoto and Julia Bryan-Wilson as well as performance studies scholar Vivian Huang to examine how Ono's work centered on the direct engagement of audiences and demanded audience accountability. As I suggested in the introduction to this article, the self-reflexive aesthetics of perplexity in *Film No. 4* are achieved through the constraining film production device of the treadmill and played out in walkers' responses to the film. Through the aesthetics of perplexity, Ono's *Film No. 4* implicated viewers as participants in the social and political structures of the United States' intervention in Vietnam, advocated for persistence in the face of the war's apparent meaninglessness, and intervened in the efficient ideological operation of the war machine. Negotiating between autonomy and theatricality, *Film No. 4* on the one hand solicits an audience and accepts the status of commodity. On the other, its silliness and apparent failure to fulfill its own promise to petition constitute a gimmicky, inscrutable form of protest. The perplexity at work in *Film No. 4* is both a method of resistance and a way of engaging an audience.

#### PERPLEXITY

Perplexity, as an aesthetic judgment, arises from the apprehension of the absurd. The absurd is that which defies reason, norms, established rules. Absurdity, as a formal device in artworks, provokes confusion, exceeds expectation, and rejects conventions of artistic making. As a mode of humor and an outlook, it identifies hypocrisy and acknowledges the limits and failures of human aspirations. Incomprehensibility and estrangement attend the absurd. Fundamental to the absurd, according to art historian Katherine Guinness and scholar of art and digital culture Charlotte Kent, is how it raises questions without providing answers, solutions, or hope.<sup>4</sup> This lack of clarity both creates the impulse to make sense of an absurd situation while refusing to provide any sense at all. As Kent explains, the ambiguity of the absurd, its refusal of didacticism and moralism, requires audience members to decide for themselves how to proceed, to “develop their own position.”<sup>5</sup> Therein lies its political potentiality and its epistemological thrust: it creates the conditions for change and the creation of new perspectives and knowledge. To be perplexed, then, is to experience a feeling of confusion—tension, uncertainty, longing—prompted by the unanswered questions cultivated by absurdity. Perplexity occurs in an affective gap between a question asked and a refused answer: it is a feeling of curiosity and confoundment. The perplexing troubles easy categorization, definition, and delineation.

4. Katherine Guinness and Charlotte Kent, “Introduction,” in *Contemporary Absurdities*, 4.

5. Charlotte Kent, “The Absurd and an Agonistic Opportunity,” in *Contemporary Absurdities*, 114.

Categorization, definition, and delineation—processes achieved through gridded visualizations and surveillance of the body as well as through the hegemonic establishment of boundaries of acceptable feeling—are strategies integral to racialization, capitalist imperialism, and the construction of the Other.<sup>6</sup> Linked with affect and interpretation, race is both a construct and lived experience of social orders. Racial and sexual orders that compel non-white subjects to perform as conciliatory objects of both desire and disdain for white subjects were central to the smooth operation of twentieth-century US militarism and imperial intervention in Vietnam. Affect and cultural theorists including Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, and Xine Yao have examined the possibilities for racialized subjects to introduce friction into these social paradigms of sentimentality and sympathy, which demand emotive understanding on the part of minoritized subjects but never reciprocate.<sup>7</sup> Affect, as these theorists have shown, is a mechanism by which race is constructed and policed; it is also a tool with which racialized subjects challenge structures of power. Antisocial affects (e.g., anger, melancholy, and hopelessness) call into question normative models of relationality that privilege positive feelings structurally afforded to white subjects such as happiness and comfort.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, so-called negative affects resist co-optation or manipulation by individuals and institutions of power. As Yao puts it, “antisocial affects are vilified as unfeeling because they have insurgent potential that may not be legible or instrumentalized toward resistance.”<sup>9</sup> Affect and post- and decolonial theorists’ examinations of legibility as a historical tool of empire are therefore also central to my claims regarding perplexity.<sup>10</sup>

Entwining a protective mode of refusal with an address to power, the perplexity of Ono’s film offers no easy resolution to the challenges presented by artistic protest, such as the role of the art object in protest and subjects’ differential access to civic participation, even as it insists on the necessity of persisting in the work of activism. Drawing upon Huang’s theorization of Ono’s inscrutable play on the Orientalist expectation of Asian American hospitality as compliant acceptance, I argue that Ono’s *Film No. 4* refuses capitalist and imperialist injunctions to productivity and legibility for the racialized,

6. For a discussion of the grid as a tool of visualization and surveillance instrumentalized for racial capitalism see Jussi Parikka, *Operational Images: From the Visual to the Invisual* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 49–50. Parikka draws upon Simone Browne’s theorization of the visual culture of surveillance with roots in diagrammatic images of the Middle Passage in Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2015), 47–49.

7. See much of Sara Ahmed’s work, including *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). Also see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005); Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Duke University Press, 2021); and Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2008).

8. See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010). Another sticky, negative affect is Ngai’s articulation of “animatedness,” which runs through both stereotypes of Asian Americans as model minorities, a stereotype that centers on the yielding to normative behaviors and white dominant culture, and of Black Americans as susceptible to excessive displays of emotion. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 94–97.

9. Yao, *Disaffected*, 6.

10. Drawing on philosopher Édouard Glissant’s articulation of opacity, Yao and performance studies scholar Vivian Huang theorize “unfeeling” or “inscrutable” refusals of compulsions to be seen and understood as a mode of resisting hegemonic oppressions. See Yao, *Disaffected*, 28, and Vivian L. Huang, *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (Duke University Press, 2022), 18.

minoritized subject. As Huang theorizes, inscrutability as an aesthetic mode is a “minor racial performative that signals social epistemologies other than white nationalist frameworks that narrate Asian American life as white aspiration or nonexistence.”<sup>11</sup> Against dominant inscriptions of race that delimit, homogenize, and exoticize Asian American identity, Huang examines how inscrutability—or, the strategic claiming and performance of social and aesthetic impenetrability, what Huang calls “expressive cultures of surface”—enact self-protective, creative, and community-building functions.<sup>12</sup> I suggest that the artist’s insistence on the simplicity of her film’s premise, which utterly confused interviewers and journalists during the film’s promotion,<sup>13</sup> resonates with Huang’s theorization of inscrutability as a withholding or flatness that creates grounds for different ways of knowing and interacting and that exceed inscriptions of racialized behavior.

Not a colonialist unknowability imposed on Ono as a Japanese artist, the perplexity cultivated by Ono’s film is an aesthetic form that prompts alternative methods of knowing and that confuses dominant narratives of national, racial, gender, and sexual identities that undergird imperialist projects, including the Vietnam War. Ono’s work does not constitute a traditional example of direct action.<sup>14</sup> Rather, it presents conceptualism as an absurdist strategy of navigating institutional power that acknowledges the limits of artistic ability to change material and political structures. It cultivates confoundment as a response to the performance of inscrutability by Ono as the filmmaker and by potential participants (those who, due to their status as minoritized or marginalized subjects, risk bodily harm or political censure by signing an appeal). While I take up inscrutability in theorizing the perplexity at work in Ono’s film, my intervention theorizes how an inscrutable, protective refusal of the inscription of identity might also call out mechanisms of this inscription. Perplexity is something that acknowledges that certain subjects, including Asian and Asian American subjects as well as Black subjects, have different access to efficacy and intentionality in the context of traditional forms of civic engagement (such as the petition and the march) in which not everyone can participate equally and with the same level of risk.

#### FOUR AND FILM NO. 4

Early in 1966, Ono made a short film that she conceptually extended into *Film No. 4*. Ono filmed the first version, titled *Four (Fluxfilm no. 16)*, over the course of a few hours

11. Huang, *Surface Relations*, 4.

12. Inscrutability, traditionally an Orientalist imposition on Asian Americans that structures racial hierarchies, is rejected, reworked, and subverted in the artistic practice of artists including Ono as explained in Huang’s analysis. Huang, *Surface Relations*, 2.

13. For example, a journalist described the process of filming as “surprising.” Eric Wilkins, “London Derrière,” *True Adventures* (1967), 62. Additionally, John Trevelyan, secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, described Ono’s and Cox’s artistic philosophy as “an Oriental philosophy which few of us in this country can understand easily.” Trevelyan qtd. in “Actress protests over film ban,” *Guardian Journal*, March 11, 1967, 7.

14. As scholar of American studies T.V. Reed has noted, “direct action forms” include “civil disobedience, sit-ins, strikes, boycotts, building or land takeovers, and other dramatic confrontations.” T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxi.

in her New York City apartment with the assistance of artist and filmmaker Jeff Perkins and Ono's then-husband Anthony Cox, who operated the camera. A silent film, *Four* begins with a series of flashing intertitles naming the stars of the film including artists associated with Fluxus and adjacent New York art scenes. Among others, these participants included the two cameramen, Bici Hendricks, Carolee Schneemann, James Tenney, Ono herself, and Ono's young daughter Kyoko (born in 1963). An open-ended signifier that invites viewers to imagine additional participants, the word "and" blinks for a few seconds before the film cuts to a close-up shot of a single person's buttocks jiggling in motion as the person walks. The unspecified "and" secures the participants' anonymity—the inability to attach the image of a backside to a specific person. After several seconds, a shot of another butt replaces the first. The pattern repeats over the course of nine minutes. The images hover in and out of sharp focus as the camera fails to maintain a steady distance from the bodies of the filmed subjects, who walked around the apartment as the camera pursued their behinds. The crossed lines rendered by the gluteal folds and clefts form fleshy quadrants: a butt cheek in each top corner and the bulge of upper thighs in the lower half of the composition. The quadrants sway in and out of symmetry as the camera jostles along with the ripples of gluteal skin.

Completed early in 1967 and filmed the year before in the London home of poet and curator Victor Musgrave, the second version elaborates on the concept of the first. The eighty-minute film presents another series of tightly framed backsides. When projected on a large screen, the buttocks balloon beyond a human scale, rendering the anatomy strange or grotesque. At this scale, the enormous butts are not always identifiable as particular parts of the human body. The phenomenological effect is perplexing in its movement: squishy swaying comes in and out of recognizability.

*Film No. 4* begins with a series of flashing intertitles naming the film's participants, including British pop artist Richard Hamilton and film critic Raymond Durgat. To gather participants, Ono placed a call in a theatrical newspaper, and while some of the filmed subjects were Ono's acquaintances or friends—intellectuals, artists, journalists, and musicians—she recorded around two hundred sets of moving cheeks.<sup>15</sup> In Ono's hands, the elevated status of these figures became literal butts of a joke that questions the social and aesthetic structures of modernism. Like in *Four*, linear shadows cast by participants' anatomy divide the filmic image into quadrants. Unlike in *Four*, the quadrants in *Film No. 4* remain mostly centered and stacked on screen between cuts. The steadiness of the shots resulted from Ono's direction, which positioned walking participants on a treadmill while a stationary camera documented their posterior movements. These aspects of the film—the fixed camera position and the grid—resonate with experimental film practices and the structure of the grid as a hallmark of modernity and fit into wider avant-garde and modernist aesthetics during the 1960s and '70s. Film scholar Scott MacDonald

15. "Film No. 4," in *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show*, ed. Klaus Biesenbach and Christophe Cherix (The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 164. In conversation with Scott MacDonald, Ono explained the nature of her relationship to participants, stating "Well, we had an ad, yes, but most of the people were friends of friends." Yoko Ono interviewed by Scott MacDonald, "Yoko Ono: Ideas on Film: Interview/Scripts," *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1989), 9.

writes that the moving images in *Film No. 4* are “rigorously serial,” however, “the ‘grid’ against which we measure the motion is temporal, as well as implicitly spatial: though there’s no literal grid behind the bottoms, each bottom is framed in precisely the same way.”<sup>16</sup> Further situating both *Four* and *Film No. 4* in these histories of the grid, curator Chrissie Iles suggests that *Four* “parodies the pseudoscientific role of the camera as an ‘objective’ witness” and that *Film No. 4* “echoes Conceptual Art’s use of measurement and the grid to interrogate the conditions of representation.”<sup>17</sup> In Ono’s work, muscles and skin jostle to loosen the rigidity of the grid, a tool of modernity used to discipline the human body and an emblem of modernism used to declare the autonomy of the art object.<sup>18</sup>

#### AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL AUTONOMY: A PROBLEM FOR PROTEST ART

The gluteal jostling suggests how, as a feature of Ono’s unconventional approach to protest, *Film No. 4* signaled a shift from the autonomy of abstract painting toward dematerialized art’s participatory investments and de-hierarchized modes of critique. The voice-over’s contradictory assessments of Ono’s concept for *Film No. 4* further speaks to a series of mid-century aesthetic debates about art’s political role and methods of enacting social change. As noted by art historians including Matthew Israel, Francis Frascina, and Julia Bryan-Wilson, dominant formalist aesthetic theories and attendant debates surrounding the autonomy of the art object created a dilemma of aesthetics versus political effectiveness for antiwar artists during the mid-century.<sup>19</sup> These debates were inflected by several factors, including artists’ concerns about censorship, propaganda, and political co-optation. According to formalist critic and advocate for color field painters Clement Greenberg, a painting attained the status of artwork only through its pure, abstract autonomy and demonstration of the painted surface’s flatness, thereby resisting consumption as a commodity. A central concern of Greenbergian aesthetic theories was that political art risked not only didacticism but also served as propaganda because it traditionally relied on a legible, figurative visual language to illustrate opposition to forces outside of the artwork. Yet, abstraction did not avoid co-optation by state power. During the 1950s, the US government was involved in international exhibitions of modern art that sought to promote abstract expressionism as symbolic of the American values of

16. MacDonald also notes that Ono’s work is “an early instance of the serial structuring that was to become so common in avant-garde film by the end of the 1960s (in Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* and Ernie Gehr’s *Serene Velocity*, Hollis Frampton’s *Zorns Lemma*, Robert Huot’s *Rolls: 1971*, J.J. Murphy’s *Print Generation . . .*.)” Scott MacDonald, “Yoko Ono: Ideas on Film: Interview/Scripts,” 4.

17. Chrissie Iles, “Erotic Conceptualism: The Films of Yoko Ono,” in *YES: Yoko Ono*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (Japan Society and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), 203–04.

18. For a discussion of the grid’s uses in disciplining and envisioning the body see Phillip Thurtle, *Biology in the Grid: Graphic Design and the Envisioning of Life* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018). For the grid’s relationship to the autonomy of the art object, see Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” *October* 9 (1979): 50–64.

19. Matthew Israel, *Kill for Peace: American Artists Against the Vietnam War* (University of Texas Press, 2013), 37–42; Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester University Press, 2000), 58; Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (University of California Press, 2009), 27–29.



individual freedom. As art historian Serge Guilbaut has shown, painters working in abstraction such as Jackson Pollock sought to assert aesthetic individualism alongside a political neutrality, a form of artistic rebellion that politicians then “transformed into aggressive liberal ideology” during the mid-twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> As governmental patronage came to the attention of New York avant-garde artists in the mid-1960s, it signaled to them that even art with no readily apparent political content could be instrumentalized in service of ideological reproduction.<sup>21</sup> Following McCarthyism, artists remained wary of blacklisting and other potential forms of suppression precipitated by actual or perceived subversion by centers of cultural power and government bodies. This paradox prompted even fervently antiwar artists such as Ad Reinhardt and others associated with the art circles with which Ono was associated to position their art practices as separate from their political activism during the 1960s.<sup>22</sup>

As the decade progressed, artists became increasingly disillusioned with modernist claims to the work’s autonomy (its privileged status outside the realm of capitalist markets), and they sought new modes of resisting the commodification of art and challenging conceptions of its idealized separation from life. As art historian Lucy Lippard demonstrates, conceptualism—and other dematerialized art practices such as performance art that valued ephemerality, process, and unpretentiousness over the final art object—arose from these concerns about the art object’s relationship to exchange and the commodity form. Lists, graphs, and other boring forms of seriality were vehicles for repetition and routine, even as they remained referential to art itself and incoherent to broad audiences. As Lippard explains, conceptual artists in particular sought to restructure the channels of artistic communication, thereby offering “posterity a particularly tangled account.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, much of this entanglement, or perplexity, resulted from conceptualist practices of, as Lippard characterizes it, “communication about communication” rather than artworks that facilitate communication between people.<sup>24</sup> The resultant aesthetic difficulty of conceptual art—its abstrusity, absurdity, or boredom—sought to restructure the relationship between viewers, art, and makers.

The difficulty of conceptual art, especially the absurdity and lack of clarity in *Film No. 4*, performs a kind of epistemological inconvenience that entwines questions about art’s autonomy with skepticism about the autonomy of the individual subject. According to affect theorist Berlant, inconvenience disturbs fantasies of autonomy and self-control. For Berlant, the fantasy of sovereignty is a defense mechanism that seeks to protect “the liberal colonial state and the citizenship subjectivity shaped by it.”<sup>25</sup> Relationality is fundamentally inconvenient—full of annoyances, social friction, and conflicting needs

20. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 200.

21. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 29.

22. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 9.

23. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (University of California Press, 1997), vii.

24. Lippard, *Six Years*, xvii.

25. Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Duke University Press, 2022), 15.

and investments. The paradox of relationality is embodied in how people seek out this frustration, a goal characterized by “a life texture involving loss, contingent mutuality, and a desire to mobilize the resources of tradition and the work of having each other’s backs” (or, as in Ono’s film, backsides).<sup>26</sup> This “inconvenience drive,” Berlant continues, is not simply a form of communality that fulfills human needs such as hunger and social connection but is also “a zone of attention in which heterotopic forms of life might build out.”<sup>27</sup> *Film No. 4* takes up the imperative of creating a “zone of attention”—a space for noticing and practicing care—that exists in an alternate time and place that might be achieved through disavowed labor, including protest.

In the remaining sections of this article, I examine how Ono’s film uses conceptualist serial images of unidentifiable yet exposed butts as well as the repetition of audio recordings of participants’ assertions about labor, protest, and race. This audio and visual repetition harnesses inscrutability as a protective mode of participation for those othered in structures of power and addresses those advantaged by those same structures.

#### YOKO ONO’S CONCEPTUALIST AND ACTIVIST ART PRACTICES

Humorous reversals of expectations or paradoxical contradictions characterize Ono’s conceptual art.<sup>28</sup> Explaining that Ono self-describes her work as “‘con art’—a pun between ‘conceptual’ and ‘con,’” Midori Yoshimoto asserts that a “deceptive playfulness” characterizes Ono’s art.<sup>29</sup> In the exhibition catalog for Ono’s 2015 solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Yoshimoto describes Ono’s practices as centered on the direct engagement of audiences (such as her event scores and instructional works, which prompt audience interaction by giving directions for how to complete artworks through the act of imagining).<sup>30</sup> Part of Ono’s conceptualist practice during the 1960s involved writing and enacting event and film scores (i.e., simple instructions for how audiences complete an artwork). By inviting and insisting on viewer participation, Ono decentered the heroic, singular (white, male) artist in favor of collective creativity. Recounting an origin tale of her conceptualist practice, Ono situated its nascence in the context of World War II displacement and trauma. In an address published for circulation at a group exhibition of Fluxus members at Judson Gallery in New York City in March 1966 and reprinted for her solo exhibition at Indica Gallery in London later that year, Ono wrote that her method of creating instructional paintings “derives from as far back as the time of the Second World War when we had no food to eat, and my brother and I exchanged menus in the air.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, Ono and her brother imagined themselves at a restaurant with abundant culinary options from which to order meals.

26. Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 126.

27. Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 126.

28. Francesca Wilmott, “1960–62,” in *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960–1971*, 45.

29. Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York* (Rutgers University Press, 2005), 89.

30. Midori Yoshimoto, “1960–62,” in *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960–1971*, 80–83.

31. Yoko Ono, “To the Wesleyan People,” reproduced in *War Is Over! (if you want it): Yoko Ono*, ed. Rachel Kent (Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2013), 28.

This play created social and familial bonds amid experiences of deprivation. From its beginning, Ono's conceptualism dealt with and processed the horrors of war through social connection.

In contrast to the conceptualist absurdity of *Film No. 4*, more commonly studied artist protests responded to the war's violence by taking a variety of polemical forms including op-eds, marches, sit-ins, performative re-enactments, and takeovers of media outlets.<sup>32</sup> For artists during the mid- to late 1960s, the organization of individuals into antiwar coalitions required strategic navigation of institutional restrictions, dominant narratives of the military intervention in Vietnam, and the proliferation of images in mass media. At the dawn of the next decade, artists' increasing disillusionment with art's ability to intervene in the theater of war in Vietnam during the late 1960s prompted their attempts to circulate in the mainstream spotlight further.<sup>33</sup>

Despite differences in form between Ono's activism and other protest efforts of the late 1960s, Ono herself adopted this strategy in 1969 and the early 1970s during her antiwar campaigns with John Lennon. Leveraging celebrity, Ono's media interventions with Lennon constituted what Bryan-Wilson has characterized as unconventional protest that "operated on a level so removed from normal discourses of protest that no one could constrain it."<sup>34</sup> Ono also strategically engaged mass media while editing and promoting *Film No. 4*. She participated in interviews with the British Broadcasting Corporation and included recordings of the interviews in the voice-over narration of the film. Participants' and the media's contradictory and skeptical assessments of Ono's work are part of the film itself. Moreover, some of the audio narration specifically addresses protest. Around eighteen minutes into the film, the voice-over states, "I've protested for the last fifteen years about things . . . I'm at this particular period in my life when I don't feel I'm protesting against anything. There's nothing to protest because they've won. They've literally won. You know, whatever you want to protest against, they've won!" While this narration drips with pessimism, Ono's film continues for another hour, countering the voice's fatalism with more butts.

This comic gesture presents an expression of resignation and then matches it with successive moonings. Mooning as a slapstick gesture of protest resonates with what art historian Craig Peariso has described as stylistically campy activist tactics particular to the mid- to late twentieth century. According to Peariso, "put ons," or theatricalized politics that often took form as incessantly affirmative conversational misdirections, were used by political activists including Abbie Hoffman, members of the Gay Activists Alliance, and Eldridge Cleaver during antiwar protests and gay and Black liberation movements.<sup>35</sup> The

32. Israel, *Kill for Peace*, 5–7. Israel offers the following typology of artists' approaches to protest: extra-aesthetic actions (i.e., conventional protest activities such as marches and strikes); collective aesthetic endeavors (e.g., organized group exhibitions or murals); use of direct evidence in artworks (e.g., photographs attesting to war crimes or other disputed facts); and advance memorials (i.e., artworks that subvert the conventions of war monuments and their attendant heroic narratives).

33. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Remembering Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*," *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (2003): 116.

34. Bryan-Wilson, "Remembering Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*," 116.

35. Peariso articulates two forms of the put-on: "relentless agreement" and "the actualization of the stereotype." Peariso suggests that the put-on may function as a "different form of resistance, one that began from a sense of the

absurdity of Ono's film is in dialogue with Peariso's theorization of the put-on, but a consideration of the aesthetic strategies and mode of production deployed in Ono's film also draws out key elements of perplexity at work in *Film No. 4*: it deploys anonymity as well as revelation as a mode of cultivating participation rather than alienation and it performs the continuity and perseverance of activist labor that seeks to form a better future despite structural resistance.

Simultaneously a strategy of anonymization and exposure, the filming of naked butts in this instance throws into light the stakes of signing onto a petition and suggests a method of navigating its risks for both subjects already working toward practices of freedom and those not. In an interview included in the film's audio, Ono described the bottom as a particularly "defenseless" and universal aspect of human anatomy.<sup>36</sup> While bottoms are features shared across lines of difference, vulnerability modulates depending on social identities and the political status of an individual. For those already marked and policed as Other, it is riskier to sign onto a petition, to identify oneself in terms of opposition to power, than it is for those habituated to and advantaged by insider status. After all, FBI surveillance under the auspices of COINTELPRO (1956–71) targeted antiwar and civil rights activists (including both Hoffman and Cleaver, as well Angela Davis, whose work I address shortly) during the period in which Ono's film was made and screened. The inclusion of well-known artists such as Hamilton enjoins those with cultural capital to invest it in the work of protest.

Questions about the relationship between the butt as a universal and vulnerable anatomical feature central to the act of walking and societal futurity as it may be secured by protest recurs in Ono's practice. According to Bryan-Wilson, Ono's recurring treatment of stereotypically pesky insects, behinds, and farts in films and conceptual artworks functions as "corporeal institutional critique."<sup>37</sup> Ono's institutional critique rebukes not only the hierarchical, exclusionary structure of the art museum, but also larger institutions, political systems, and their undergirding ideologies—including the military, an object of critique central to *Film No. 4*'s form of perplexing protest. As Bryan-Wilson has demonstrated, *Film No. 4* relates to Ono's conceptual exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art referred to as *Posterity Show* (1971), an unrealized event at the museum during which photographers would take pictures of the backsides of attendees and the resultant images would be immediately printed and displayed on the gallery walls.<sup>38</sup> Bryan-Wilson notes, "Infantile but also militarized, the trooping backsides are a fraught locus of innocence, pleasure, and sensuality, but also disgrace, training, and parental discipline."<sup>39</sup> Both Bryan-Wilson and Mignon Nixon have contextualized the rhythmic movement of the ambulatory asses in relation to the political upheaval of the 1960s by

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historical impossibility of transcendence, and thus looked to seed resistance in acts of interpretation." Craig J. Peariso, *Radical Theatrics: Put-Ons, Politics, and the Sixties* (University of Washington Press, 2014), 25, 28.

36. Scott MacDonald also notes how Ono described, in the interview included in the film's audio, the bottom as "defenseless." MacDonald, "Yoko Ono: Ideas on Film," 5.

37. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "For Posterity: Yoko Ono," in *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960–1971*, 21.

38. Bryan-Wilson, "For Posterity: Yoko Ono," 21.

39. Bryan-Wilson, "For Posterity: Yoko Ono," 21.

rhyming the moving butts in *Film No. 4* with the action involved in both military marching and political demonstrations.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the same year that Ono produced *Four* and just prior to the release of *Film No. 4 (Bottoms)*, the National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam organized massive protest marches across the US.

I agree with both art historians that the systematized walking of numerous bodies involved in the production of *Film No. 4* evokes both military spectacle and protest, yet I am stuck on how the production of Ono's film also diverges from those modes of corporeal activity and collective performance. A military march, a grand spectacle of soldierly might and nationalistic fervor, is patriotism made manifest but also a threat to action, an instrumentalization of synchronized bodily movement toward the violent maintenance of national boundaries.<sup>41</sup> Protest marches require a specific destination to enact collective demonstration of the scale of antiwar sentiment; protest marches aim to heighten awareness of the growing opposition; protest marches symbolically enact the progressive aims called for by moving away from status quo toward a new site, a peaceful utopia.

#### THE TREADMILL AS A GIMMICKY FILM PRODUCTION DEVICE

By contrast, the treadmill used in *Film No. 4* and the repetitiveness of the gluteal imagery resulting from its implementation is a self-reflexive, absurd artistic tactic. The treadmill is humorously precarious in both its facture and the movement it compels. The precarity of the treadmill's structure results from its reliance on surrounding architectural features: its handles are propped on a nearby fireplace. The prong-shaped handles reach around the walker's body just above the stomach in order to direct the corporeal adherence to a specific position in front of the camera. The disc of the walking platform appears to be made from a composite wood or other cheap material, cut into two large semi-circles and joined together, the seam apparent in images documenting the film's production. Its apparently shoddy construction or strictly functional form no doubt comes from the artist's need to expeditiously construct a thing from affordable materials in service of a specific "graphic" effect and bodily action: the rhythmic bouncing of cheeks and perpetual walking.<sup>42</sup>

But it also makes walking *harder*. In the first ten minutes of the film's run time, a recorded audio interview with a participant explains the film's mode of production and attests to the bodily precarity it produces. The participant states, "You stand on a platform that runs on ball bearings, so you can walk forward while staying in the same place. It is very tricky; the thing runs away with you." This trickiness refers to the difficulty of

40. Bryan-Wilson, "For Posterity: Yoko Ono," 21; Mignon Nixon, "After Images," *October* 83 (1998), 114.

41. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Harvard University Press, 1995), 77.

42. Ono described the subject of the film as "a purely graphic idea" in 1967. Ono qtd. in Eric Wilkins, "London Derrière." In the 1989 interview with Scott MacDonald, she described her intention to capture "a certain beat." Yoko Ono interviewed by Scott MacDonald, "Yoko Ono: Ideas on Film," 8.

balancing atop the unwieldy, rotating machine. It also implies the aesthetic reception of the events unfolding on top of it: the use of the treadmill produces a visual trick that keeps the butts centered on screen rather than moving away and that keeps viewers wondering. The interviewer asks what happens next, and the participant responds, “*Nothing* . . . When you’ve got the hang of it so you don’t stagger and lurch and weave from side-to-side, he [Cox] films for a few minutes.” The narration offers a belabored account of the filming process, and the participant’s characterization of the treadmill as tricky, paired with the reflexivity of describing the film’s production in the film itself, registers as what cultural theorist Ngai has demonstrated is central to the gimmick in capitalist society: simultaneous over- and underperformance that calls attention to itself, thereby prompting suspicion and delight. Ngai writes of how the gimmick structures a relationality that requires the perceiver of a gimmick to acknowledge the device’s potency for someone else: it is a form “in which belief no longer needs to take the form of conviction in order to be powerful or socially effective.”<sup>43</sup> The gimmick, as Ngai theorizes, registers uncertainty about the value produced by labor: it is “at once excessively laborious but also strangely too easy.”<sup>44</sup> In the case of the self-reflexively implemented treadmill in *Film No. 4*, the value in question is that of antiwar activism, a form of nonproductive work that provokes anxiety about social functioning in a capitalist economy. How, the imputation goes, will anything get done if protesters are out in the streets instead of doing their jobs?

Capitalism devalues, hides, and exploits social reproduction—the work involved in sustaining human lives and societal structures. Antiwar protest is a form of social reproduction in that it seeks to create better conditions for people and for living. As Marxist feminists Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser argue, “Far from being valued in its own right, the making of people is treated as a mere means to the making of profit.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, this subordination of social reproduction to economic production entrenches gender, racial, and sexual oppression. The gimmicky treadmill in Ono’s film causes the participants to work too hard, going nowhere, doing nothing, and wasting labor. It is a device for introducing friction into the capitalist machine that devalues the labor involved in social reproduction.

The treadmill used in Ono’s film indexes expenditure of energy for nothing productive. But what *does* all this labor do? The pointlessness of these butts and the voice-over, or how they are “aimless” as Ono phrases it, creates a loose visual and sonic pattern that then prompts viewers to look for meaning.<sup>46</sup> Ono’s film creates the conditions for a change in perception and politics through absurdity, through the apparent wastefulness of positioning naked, walking butts as an antiwar gesture. It draws attention to the disavowed labor of protest, labor positioned as a blockade to the perpetual

43. Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 97.

44. Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 56.

45. Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2019), 22.

46. Yoko Ono, *Program for first London screening of No. 4*.

demands to produce and consume in capitalist society. As the voice-over comments, “You feel the thing moving through you. And it is just sort of one long continuation.” It is precisely this repetition and continuation that registers as a demand for persistence in the face of seemingly unending violence reproduced by American capitalist imperialism.

The persistence required by and involved in nonproductive activist labor, however, is unevenly distributed, its necessity and practice inflected by gender, race, and class. As Black feminist and Marxist activist and philosopher Angela Davis notes, Black women, working outside the home while also maintaining their own family and domestic lives, have “carried the double burden of wage labor and housework—a double burden which always demands that working women possess the persevering powers of Sisyphus.”<sup>47</sup> The Sisyphean nature of disavowed labor is especially acute for Black women and working-class women. As I suggest in the following section, the perplexity in Ono’s film points toward inscriptions of identity categories by entities and structures of power while also gesturing toward the uneven burden borne by those with lived experiences of marginalized identities. Those already doing the work of protest, especially activists of color, must deal with threats of retribution in the forms of state and police violence and surveillance. Ono’s film addresses this riskiness while calling for participation by those more insulated from risk and those not already involved (e.g., white subjects or artists and art critics whose cultural capital might be invested in the work of protest).

#### PERPLEXITY AND THE POLITICS OF RACE IN *FILM NO. 4*

The meticulous editing of the audio in Ono’s film also draws out how visual and capitalist economies determine and restrict social life, especially for racialized subjects. In *Film No. 4*’s voice-over, an unnamed narrator, nearly twenty-five minutes into the film, says, “The nearer you stood to the middle, the easier it was to walk around it. I’d be happier if they were doing something like grinding flour with it instead of making films with it. That would be real social, that would have meant something more.” Here, the participant reflects on the difficulty of ambulating on the device, noting the position that facilitates movement best. Again, the gimmickiness of the machine emerges in the participant’s skepticism toward the machine’s usefulness as filmmaking-device, and longing for its meaningful use in social terms. Ono’s use of the treadmill in a deliberately absurdist way (i.e., the enforcement of perpetual walking for the illogical task of using butts for protest rather than for capitalist production) adheres to Dave Ball’s typology of “tactical absurdity” in conceptual art, especially how absurdity undermines authority and the self-reflexive violation of conventions of artistic making, purpose, and form.<sup>48</sup> Using

47. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, rev. ed. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 193.

48. Dave Ball, “Eight Variants of Tactical Absurdity in (Post)Conceptual Art: An Overperformance of Typological Exactitude,” in *Contemporary Absurdities, Existential Crises, and Visual Art*, ed. Katherine Guinness and Charlotte Kent (Intellect Books, 2024), 134–35.

a machine associated with capitalist production to compel walkers in the act of petitioning upends the expectations for the device's purpose.

The specific social uses of the treadmill and Ono's film are further questioned as the voice-over continues. Two minutes after the musing about the relationships between the treadmill as film-production device, individual happiness, food production, and social meaning, a voice-over asks how the film will represent racial difference, framing this concern in terms of visual aesthetics. The voice asks, "Will there be any, um, color bum?" and then, amid inaudible mumblings, the narration responds, "Just occasionally a nice black ass would be a beautiful contrast."<sup>49</sup> This narration is repeated later in the film, underscoring the artist's deliberate decision to include it, but Ono's repeated inclusion of this question and the voice's response is ambivalent. Obscuring racial difference or flattening it into binary terms is a technique of power used to maintain racial hierarchy. But the intentional performance of illegibility may serve protective functions for those harmed by the enforcement of racial inequality.

What might the speaker have meant and how might have audiences understood this inquiry? In Britain during the 1960s, the terms "coloured" and "black"—along with racist epithets—racialized and homogenized various groups made by legislation and other political maneuvers to be non-white, including people of African, West Indian, Indian, Pakistani, Australian, and New Zealander descent.<sup>50</sup> In response to this Othering and systemic racism and inspired by the civil rights and Black Power movements in the US, South Asian activist groups identified with the word "black," which signaled solidarity and emphasized the linked colonial pasts and ongoing racist exclusions experienced by Africans and Asians living in Britain, during the 1970s.<sup>51</sup> The question and answer about "black" bottoms in Ono's film sits at the intersections of these valences and contexts, perplexingly holding together signs of racist structures in the US and Britain and the activist gestures that would combat them.

The question seems to ask whether people of color will participate in the film and positions this participation exclusively in terms of visual appeal, thereby evacuating body

49. Because the transcriptions of audio in the film are all my own and therefore susceptible to errors in hearing and misinterpretation, the question arises of the exact language used by the speaker and whether the speaker intended to refer to race in this statement. I consider this statement to invoke the social constructions of racial categories, which forms the lived experience of racial identity.

50. Sara Ahmed has theorized these kinds of racialized discourses as mechanisms that "secure the white subject as sovereign in the nation" and that produce non-white immigrants as Others. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2. Elizabeth Buettner explains how "immigrant" became a racially coded word, interchangeable with "coloured," in the mid-1960s. Elizabeth Buettner, "'This Is Staffordshire Not Alabama': Racial Geographies of Commonwealth Immigration in Early 1960s Britain," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, no. 4 (2014): 712.

51. Ahmed discusses this use of the word "black" in solidarity as a "reorientation device, as a political orientation, despite the ways in which it can risk concealing the differences between bodies that are of different colors and the different histories 'behind' us." Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 156. Media and culture scholar Anandi Ramamurthy describes how the Asian youth movements used the term "black," which "enabled a collective identity and solidarity with Africans and African Caribbeans in the struggle against racism." Anandi Ramamurthy, "A Heterogeneous Collectivity," in *Black Star: Britain's Asian Youth Movements* (Pluto Press, 2013), 65.



politics, especially racial politics, in favor of an aestheticization of skin tone. In addition to imagining race as separate from lived experience, the voice-over thus relies on a categorizing logic—one that imagines identity markers as discrete and separable—commonly used by white feminists and gender theorists during the mid-twentieth century. For example, Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone, in the course of theorizing constructions of gender and women’s liberation activism, analogized the experience of white women to that of Black men, thereby ignoring the people whose lived experience did not fit neatly within either of those discrete categories, especially Black women.<sup>52</sup> Ono herself sometimes relied on this logic in writing and music, as is apparent in the song titled “Woman Is the Nigger of the World,” which was recorded on her and Lennon’s 1972 collaborative album *Some Time in New York City*. Taking its theme and chorus from Ono’s assertion in an interview with Irma Kurtz for the March 1969 issue of *Nova Magazine*, this phrase uses a racist slur and imagines “woman” as a unified category, one that apparently excludes Black women.<sup>53</sup> Black feminists, including poet Pearl Cleage and literature scholar Corrie Beatrice Claiborne, have critiqued Ono’s universalizing presumptions about womanhood as an identity category under which women experience the same oppressions and difficulties. With irony, Cleage pinpoints Ono’s presumptions and the larger structural forces they index, reminding us of the contingency of meaning based on audience experience and identity. She writes,

“Woman,” Japanese feminist/artist Yoko Ono once said, “is the nigger of the world.” I have always found this quote from Yoko offensively interesting. Who was she talking to? The question assumes that one can’t be a female and a “nigger” at the same time. Where does that leave black women? Maybe that makes us the nigger-nigger of the world. Double niggers. The mind boggles at the kind of oppression that would await such a cursed being. A creature oppressed by racism and sexism, buffeted from the niggerhaters to the womanhaters and back again with hardly time enough to take a deep breath and try to figure out what to do about it.<sup>54</sup>

For Cleage, the mental gymnastics required to understand Black women’s social roles under neoliberalism is another sign of the systematic abasement of Black women. Analyzing the above quotation, Claiborne asserts, “Cleage humorously looks at the serious subject of over-definition that plagues black women. Black women, as they are presented in this passage, are truly abject beings, so far from any sense of identity that they merely disappear or become invisible when trying to engage in the discourse of domination.”<sup>55</sup>

52. In her psychoanalytical theories of the positions of Black men, white women, and Black women in society, Firestone relies on stereotypes of Black women, including that they are aggressive. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Bantam Books, 1971). Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (Vintage Books, 1974).

53. The phrase was also reproduced on the magazine’s cover. Yoko Ono, “In the bag . . . Yoko Ono,” interview with Irma Kurtz, *Nova* (1969), 52–57.

54. Pearl Cleage, *Deals with the Devil: And Other Reasons to Riot* (Ballantine Books, 1993), 21.

55. Corrie Beatrice Claiborne, “Quiet Brown Buddha(s): Black Women Intellectuals, Silence and American Culture,” (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2000), 6.

Such domination is the product of routine behaviors, accepted ideas, received knowledge, and circular logics, the kinds of disciplinary structures that force bodies to perform in normative ways—what Ahmed has described as structures of “alignment” that produce non-white bodies out of place or out of line.<sup>56</sup> The treadmill materializes these structures, but the resultant filmic images also suggest the way they fail. As discussed earlier in this article, the squishy gluteal grid slides about as the bodies on the treadmill struggle against the trickiness of centrifugal force.

The perplexity garnered by the question and answer about Black bottoms prompts additional consideration of race and the racialized power dynamics at play in vision and how these power dynamics attest to and reify racist social, economic, and cultural systems, including those undergirding US involvement in Vietnam. The grayscale of this black-and-white film flattens visual signs used to construct race, namely ranges in skin complexion. Viewers of the film who look with a gaze accustomed to Othering the potential non-white participants might see only white butts. The voice-over positions the *limited*—“just occasional”—inclusion of a Black butt as valuable only in terms of visual contrast to the preponderance of pale-complected rears. The participant envisions the Black bottom as a foil to the white bottom. In this way, the participant’s musing calls to mind what Black feminists, political philosophers, and film theorists including bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, and Richard Dyer have demonstrated about white-dominant conventions of filming Black bodies during the mid-century—that mainstream cinematic depictions of race mobilized stereotypes of racial Blackness as foils to whiteness in order to construct and maintain white supremacy.<sup>57</sup> The voice-over points to how, as Sylvia Wynter has articulated, Western Enlightenment humanism—from which the aesthetic category of beauty emerged—required and constructed Others with which to understand its “civic-humanist, rational self-conception.”<sup>58</sup> With its roots in Enlightenment philosophy, Western liberalism’s purportedly universal freedom was never universal.

The presumed, but false, universality of Western civic-humanism has implications for protest and petitioning, specifically what it means to be a signatory and the autonomy of the individual. Communications studies scholar Armond Towns has shown how such false universality in the structures governing civic organization intersects with racial biases in the work of mid-century media theorist Marshall McLuhan.<sup>59</sup> It is important to consider these biases because McLuhan’s writings influenced Ono’s and Lennon’s activist efforts in 1969, and McLuhan famously interviewed the artist and the musician in

56. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. See also Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

57. See bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (The New Press, 1995); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Grove Press, 1967). Richard Dyer, *White* (Routledge, 1997).

58. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 282.

59. Armond R. Towns, “The (Black) Elephant in the Room: McLuhan and the Racial,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 44, no. 4 (2019), 545–54.

December 1969.<sup>60</sup> As Towns demonstrates, a presumption of whiteness runs through the Western social contract implicit in McLuhan's conception of "civilization," and his theories depend on a "racial/technological contract" that "reads Western temporality as measurable via the development of media, and such development is deemed off limits to some people due to their race."<sup>61</sup> Both McLuhan's media theories and social contract theory presume a universal capacity to sign onto the terms of a given social order, but, as Towns reminds us, the capacity to agree is tied to whiteness: for Black and brown potential signatories, the ability to join in the social contract, and have agency in its determination and exercise, is circumscribed by histories of colonialism and racial terror.<sup>62</sup> The consistency of light-complected butts in Ono's film seems to suggest that the signatories of this antiwar petition are predominantly white, reflecting the exclusionary reality of both the social contract and McLuhan's "racial/technological contract" during the late 1960s.

But Ono's film is not a studio production, and there are *apparently* no dark-skinned butts represented over the course of Ono's eighty-minute film; depending on the exposure of the film—the ambient light in the apartment combined with the bulbs and reflectors directed at the walking subjects—the posteriors reflect light in varying levels of brightness and darkness. Additionally, *Film No. 4* does not present other codes of white-dominant narrative filmmaking that conventionally cued audiences to perceive race in monochrome films. The included voice-over that suggests a participant's stated vision for the film raises the question of how race figures in Ono's embodied petition for peace, but the filmic images respond with obfuscation. This question, raised but left unanswered, prompts viewers to think about the participants—and Ono as the filmmaker and as an Asian woman— included during filming as well as those excluded. The protection afforded by racial whiteness may act as an exemption from obligations to participate in protest in a conventional sense. Ono's film, however, enjoins the viewer to consider how the work and obligation of protest falls on those marginalized by hegemonic inscriptions of race, gender, and sexuality.

*Film No. 4* and its gimmicky deployment of the treadmill suggests how the work of protest may already be underway, invisibilized by hegemonic mechanisms of devaluing the nonproductive labor of protest. Its perplexity resists injunctions to feel and act in ways that maintain structures of dominance by sustaining discomfort and uncertainty in the process of navigating the relationship between self and other as well as the social, cultural, and political forms of power that determine and mediate that relationship. The perplexity at work in Ono's film insists viewers consider their position in structures of power and in relation to others, thereby questioning the notion of autonomy,

60. Martha Ann Bari, "Mass Media is the Message: Yoko Ono and John Lennon's 1969 Year of Peace" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2007).

61. Towns, "The (Black) Elephant in the Room," 547.

62. Towns, "The (Black) Elephant in the Room," 548–49.

both of the art object and of the political subject. It enjoins a consideration of one's own sovereignty in relation to others, maintaining unease and doubt about the unified, liberal subject.<sup>63</sup> ■

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