

## Wargames: Yoko Ono and Making Peace Through Chess

Instead of asking you to imagine peace, this essay will start by asking you to imagine the beginning of a chess game. Except that everything, the board, the pieces, the table, and even the chairs, are the colour of white. (Figure 1) In front of you lies a laminated paper, with a brief description of the movements of each piece, along with the instructions “For playing as long as you can remember where all your pieces are -Yoko Ono.” (Figure 2) After working out who goes first, as both you and your opponent are playing white, you make your first opening moves. So far, each side is distinguishable as defences begin to form. However, as soon as the first gambit is played and pieces begin to be sacrificed, the board becomes an unknowable battlefield where the Ono’s antiwar philosophy emerges. You laugh with your opponent, lie, and cheat, and insist that the pawn in the key position is definitely yours and not theirs. Dialogue begins to open, as you negotiate with your foe. Communication helps to either continue the game or to find terms for an agreeable settlement. Perhaps by talking, you can even make peace.

The *White Chess Set* was one of the most popular works in Yoko Ono’s first solo London exhibition at the Indica Gallery in 1966.<sup>1</sup> Since then, it has appeared in a variety of sizes, materials, and often under a different title, *Play It By Trust*.<sup>2</sup> Created in response to the Cold War including the US War in Vietnam, the *White Chess Set* asks

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Biesenbach et al., *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show 1960 -1971* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 158.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Munroe et al., *Yes Yoko Ono / Alexandra Munroe ; with Jon Hendricks ; with Essays by David A. Ross, Murray Sayle, Jann S. Wenner ; Contributions by Bruce Altshuler ... [et Al.]* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 136.

for peace and operates on multiple levels. Ono, both a casual chess player and a staunch peace activist, dismantles the typical format of chess altogether just by changing the colour.<sup>3</sup> She says she aimed “to create a new chess game, making a fundamental rather than decorative change.”<sup>4</sup> Ono has created art addressing the idea of peace, especially in her collaborative work with John Lennon during their “Year of Peace” in 1969. During that year, Ono and Lennon produced arguably some of their most famous collaborative works, including the two *Bed ins for Peace*, the song “Give Peace A Chance,” and the *War is Over!* billboard and poster campaign. This “Year of Peace” was initially kickstarted by a letter from Peter Watkins, the director of the 1966 anti-nuclear movie *The War Game* who asked for celebrities to use their power to help “start a public conversation.”<sup>5</sup> The *White Chess Set* utilizes the same themes and activism that can be seen in Ono’s body of work as a whole: the power of the imagination and communication at the level of the individual. A psychoanalytic reading of the *White Chess Set* reveals the interplay between games and violence, the connections between the psychic response to war and the chess set, and finally what artists can do to make peace.

Scholars have often linked Ono’s *White Chess Set* to the work of Marcel Duchamp, who ended up pursuing chess over art, although chess made its appearance in some of his work.<sup>6</sup> Duchamp argued for chess’ function as an art form, finding beauty in both the aesthetics as well as the conceptual idea of testing each player’s creativity

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<sup>3</sup> Munroe, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 136.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Rothbart, “The Dragon Lady Speaks: An Interview with Yoko Ono,” *NY Arts*, June 2002, <https://danielrothbart.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Yoko-Optimized.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Bari, “Taking It to the Streets: John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s 1969 War Is Over! Campaign,” essay, in *Social Practice Art in Turbulent Times: The Revolution Will Be Live*, ed. Eric J. Schruers and Kristina Olson (London: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 33–44, 34.

<sup>6</sup> Munroe, *Yes Yoko Ono*, 136;

and imagination.<sup>7</sup> Ono has often utilized the realm of the imagination, including works like *Imagine Peace* or *Map Piece*'s instructions to "draw an imaginary map."<sup>8</sup> Ono's work has been described as a "utopian social program of love envisioned in the imagination and enacted before the world."<sup>9</sup> With *White Chess Set*, she transforms the work from an aesthetic object into a collaborative performance between audience and artist. A conceptual piece implemented in real life in the act of making peace.

There have been multiple psychoanalytic interpretations of chess.<sup>10</sup> In a case study by L. S. Penrose, he suggests that infantile conflicts were revealed in chess positions seen in dreams, and that the positions of the chess pieces reveal the relations between their equivalent human counterpart.<sup>11</sup> He also posited that by dreaming of chess, it grants the dreamer power and control over their family that they would not necessarily have in real life and the idea that checkmating the king represented the unconscious urge to kill the father.<sup>12</sup> These ideas were picked up by Ernest Jones, who agreed that chess represents an acceptable form of overcoming the father, as well as noting that many stories about chess' origins connect the game to the practice of or

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<sup>7</sup> P. N. Humble, "Marcel Duchamp: Chess Aesthete and Anartist Unreconciled," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 32, no. 2 (1998): 41–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333557>, 47; For other work looking at Duchamp and chess as an art form see Hubert Damisch and Rosalind Krauss, "The Duchamp Defense," *October* 10 (1979): 5–28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778625> and Dalia Judovitz, "Endgame Strategies: Art, Chess, and Creativity," essay, in *Drawing on Art: Duchamp and Company* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 101–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttspqm.8>.

<sup>8</sup> Yōko Ono, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions + Drawings* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 115.

<sup>9</sup> Kristine Stiles, *Concerning Consequences: Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago press, 2016), 137.

<sup>10</sup> For an example on chess being used in psychoanalytic therapy see Burton Norman Seittler, "When Words Were Wanted, But Woefully Wanting, We Waged War with Chess," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 76, no. 4 (September 19, 2016): 362–75, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s11231-016-9057-2>.

<sup>11</sup> L. S. Penrose, *Psychoanalysis and Chess*, 1925, <https://archives.ucl.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=PENROSE/1/5/1/2>, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Penrose, *Psychoanalysis and Chess*, 6-7.

substitute for war and aggression.<sup>13</sup> This connects with Mark Holowchak's ideas which utilizes Freud's theories on games to argue that play for adults is "essentially destructive and gives way to the death drive."<sup>14</sup> Through games and sports, adults are able to discharge their aggression in a socially acceptable way.<sup>15</sup> Yoko Ono's *White Chess Set* is different. It flips not only the rules of chess around, but the larger psychic function of the game as it is no longer being used to discharge aggression or hide the function of war. Instead, it is utilized in a way to make the player hyper aware of the consequences of their actions. It brings back the violence of war into chess as the sacrificed pieces line up on the sides of the board, like a pile of corpses after a battle.

The psychic undertones to war and aggression are often found in language and terminology. Adele Wilson writes that military terminology is often linked to either humour or sex in order to "bolster a soldier's psychological state" and reduce tensions.<sup>16</sup> She also notes that military jargon has the ability to mask violence and change perceptions of the actions of the military by civilians such as the substitution of "'collateral damage' for 'civilian casualties'."<sup>17</sup> Hanna Segal agrees, writing that the term nuke instead of nuclear removes the destructive realities of the terminology making it "manageable, unaggressive, even cute."<sup>18</sup> Even the term like 'nuclear chess' hides the bleak reality that the decisions of politicians and military leaders actually affect the lives

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<sup>13</sup> Ernest Jones, "The Problem of Paul Morphy: A Contribution to the Psychoanalysis of Chess," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 12 (January 1931): 1–23, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Holowchak, "Freud on Play, Games, and Sports Fanaticism," *The American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry* 39, no. 4 (December 2011): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1521/jaap.2011.39.4.695>, 12–13.

<sup>15</sup> Holowchak, "Freud," 13.

<sup>16</sup> Adele Wilson, *Military Terminology and the English Language*, 2008, <https://cperc.arts.utoronto.ca/courses/6362-WilsonAdele.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, *Military Terminology*.

<sup>18</sup> Hanna Segal, *Psychoanalysis, Literature and War: Papers, 1972-1995* (London: Routledge, 1997), 123.

of millions. Fornari says that individuals do not acknowledge their psychic unconscious desire for aggression and instead blame the institution in order to avoid feeling guilt.<sup>19</sup> This idea is visible even in the words people use. By creating gentler alternatives for phrases, people are able to remove themselves from the responsibility their psychic aggression is causing. In response to this idea, Ono is putting the 'war' back into wargames. She removes the societal veneer of nice language and is making the player directly complicit in either continuing or ending war. While the act of playing the *White Chess Set* can be playful and even fun, there is a growing understanding of individual responsibility hidden underneath the surface.

Another element from the *White Chess Set's* Cold War culture includes the development of game theory. Game theory is the attempt by scientists to use rationality and mathematics to figure out the best possible outcome for whatever scenario is at hand.<sup>20</sup> Chess is much like game theory, using math to predict and find the most optimal possible move. Links between game theory, economics, and poker were argued by journalist John McDonald during the 1940s and 50s, but it was most often applied to war, again emphasizing a tie between games and violence.<sup>21</sup> By limiting the amount of chance, politicians supposedly could hold off and deter the threat of nuclear war.<sup>22</sup> Steven Belletto also argues that pop culture conceptions of game theory appearing in books and film, also called the game theory narrative, tended to depict the Cold War as

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<sup>19</sup> Franco Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis of War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), 199.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Belletto, "The Game Theory Narrative and the Myth of the National Security State," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (June 2009): 333–57, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.0.0074>.

<sup>21</sup> Belletto, "The Game Theory," 336.

<sup>22</sup> Belletto, "The Game Theory," 352; Segal also comments on the false and shifting meaning of the word deterrence as it initially meant the prevention of the use of nuclear weapons but slowly became the idea of a "rational nuclear war." Segal, *Psychoanalysis, Literature and War*, 124.

“an intimate game with two players.”<sup>23</sup> Yoko Ono does not stray far from this interpretation, as she creates a layered setting where players are in a one on one battle. They are functioning both as individuals, as well as stand ins for the concept of the institution.

By playing the *White Chess Set*, the player takes the place of the state at war. Fornari suggests that citizens put their psychic aggression into a proverbial institutional bank in order to relieve themselves from anxiety which the state then uses to commit acts of war.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Freud argues that institutions are granted powers that the individual cannot possibly have, such as the power to commit violence and death upon another.<sup>25</sup> Chess players are able to sacrifice and kill each other’s pieces, stand in for soldiers on the field of battle. In the competitive spirit of chess, the opponent no longer is a friend, relative, or willing stranger, but is instead transformed into an enemy that must be defeated by winning the game. This transformation raises similarities with the culture of the Cold War, which projected the anxieties over the internal Terrifier onto an external, real enemy.<sup>26</sup> The threat of complete annihilation with no symbolic survivors from nuclear weaponry creates primitive anxieties and therefore creates primitive defences which desperately needs to create more evil empires in order to relieve the built up stress.<sup>27</sup> As previously suggested, the player’s internal psychic anxieties can be relieved by playing games, however in the case of actual war, it can only end in destruction.

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<sup>23</sup> Belletto, “The Game Theory,” 354.

<sup>24</sup> Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis*, xxviii

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 279.

<sup>26</sup> Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis*, 164.

<sup>27</sup> Segal, *Psychoanalysis*, 164.

Chess is a war game all about sacrifice. In order to win a game of chess, the player has to strategically give up pieces to create a better advantage over their opponent. Much like ranks in the military, each piece has an assigned value and role, and some pieces are useful more useful than others. In the game of chess and in the eyes of the state, there are pawns that must be sacrificed for the greater good. While playing chess, the player does not weep over a lost rook or ethically debate the value of trading a bishop for a knight. Nor do players grieve when they capture their opponent's pieces and checkmates their king. However, Ono suggests maybe they should. By heightening the player's awareness to war, Ono is revealing the unfair hierarchy assigned to both people and chess pieces as well as reminding the players of the consequences of what winning in war means. In connection to this, Butler's writes on grievable and ungrievable lives. They argue that some lives are in a state of in between, where they are dehumanized so their death "leaves a mark that is no mark."<sup>28</sup> By controlling who is and isn't publicly grievable, the notion of who is human can be used to further propagate military violence.<sup>29</sup> By making all pieces united by colour, Ono allows the viewer to empathize with the opponent and encourages the players to come to terms with the fact that their external enemy is human like them.

If players decide to continue the game, they might start running into a few problems. As the game moves from opening into midgame, the ownership of each piece becomes blurred and confused. Ono intends for the players to be able to trick each

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<sup>28</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 36.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 36.

other, creating an environment of light-heartedness.<sup>30</sup> There is a flexibility in the rules that is not seen in an ordinary game of chess, since the winning conditions are meant to be changed. Likewise, the flow of the game takes time to be disrupted, adding a temporal aspect to the piece. Once the board become mixed up enough, it is almost inevitable that the player will attack their own side. Klein's theory on the depressive position can be applied to this scenario as the player feels guilt over attacking their loved object.<sup>31</sup> It is also commentary on the fact that institutions fulfil their goal of war at the expense of their own citizens.

The *White Ches Set* compares the self-attacking player to the self-annihilating institution. Fornari posits that war is driven by the fear of the enemy destroying the loved object.<sup>32</sup> However, the state sometimes reaches the point where they put the loved object in danger by continuing war.<sup>33</sup> During the age of nuclear weaponry, any form of nuclear war would cause the complete destruction of the human race, turning the protecting institution into one that kills the loved object.<sup>34</sup> Fornari believes the mature action would be to prioritize the safety of the loved object over whatever anxieties caused the escalation of nuclear defences.<sup>35</sup> The *White Chess Set* asks the players how many pieces need to be lost, how many of their own do they need to accidentally attack before they put an end to the game. Fornari suggests that the protection of the

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<sup>30</sup> "Yoko Ono. White Chess Set. 1966 | MOMA," MOMA, 2015, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/15/385>.

<sup>31</sup> Melanie Klein, *Essential Papers on Object Loss*, ed. Rita V. Frankiel (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1994), 99.

<sup>32</sup> Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis*, 163.

<sup>33</sup> Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis*, 196.

<sup>34</sup> Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis*, xxvii.

<sup>35</sup> Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis*, 234.



loved object goes from the state to the individual, and individuals need to acknowledge their psychic aggression and remove it from the institutional bank.<sup>36</sup>

The position of the players shifts, from institutions making war to individuals making peace. Ono intends for the players to collaborate and create new rules to allow the game to either continue or end with both parties satisfied.<sup>37</sup> Players are taking responsibility for their violence and are purposefully removing their aggression from the institutional bank. However, Fornari argues that it is incredibly hard to broker peace as one would fear the other would gain an advantage from disarmament due to the projection of one's own internal anxieties.<sup>38</sup> This threat is understood in the alternative title of the *White Chess Set*, that of *Play It By Trust*. Armistice can only be created with some level of trust and both players need to stay true to their word in order for the game to reach a nonviolent conclusion.

Players need to undo the dehumanization and distrust that allowed the war to continue in the first place. Segal suggests that it is painful to look inward and face the responsibility and guilt of the violence that is caused, hence why it is easier psychically to create another external enemy.<sup>39</sup> Butler agrees, saying it is difficult to undo the nation's self-identity that is built on hubris, however the international connections created out of peace can create a culture of change.<sup>40</sup> They suggest that a collective understanding of vulnerability can lead to a system of care.<sup>41</sup> By creating a culture of

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<sup>36</sup> Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis*, 199.

<sup>37</sup> "Play It by Trust," Ludwig Museum, accessed April 15, 2024, <https://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/en/work/play-it-trust>.

<sup>38</sup> Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis*, 203.

<sup>39</sup> Segal, *Psychoanalysis*, 165.

<sup>40</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 31.

recognition towards vulnerability and towards each other, transformation can take place.<sup>42</sup> By practicing this notion of peace and the acknowledgement of the human, the *White Chess Set* exits the realm of imagination into the world of the real. Ono wrote, “conceptual reality, as it were, becomes a concrete ‘matter’ only when it destroys its conceptuality by asking others to enact it, as, otherwise it cannot escape from staying ‘imaginary.’”<sup>43</sup> This again shows her philosophy of intertwining the real and the imaginary and how it creates a culture of change.

Ono argues that the role of the artist can directly contribute to peace by encouraging communication. She writes that “artists can change the world into a Utopia where there is total freedom for everybody. That can be achieved only when there is total communication in the world. Total communication equals peace. This is our aim. That is what artists can do for the world!”<sup>44</sup> The *White Chess Set* furthers this goal. Ono sets up a scenario that encourages laughter and playfulness, while not shying away from the subject matter of war as the game of chess represents unconscious anxieties over war and nuclear armament. The chess set creates an environment where easy communication can occur, where players can deconstruct their notions of their opponent as an external enemy. Instead, they can empathize and connect with each other as they are bound by the same colour of chess pieces. This acknowledgement of vulnerability leads to a withdrawal from the aggression bank as players choose peace. The role of the artist is to create environments that lead to self-discovery, as it can only begin on an

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<sup>42</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 44.

<sup>43</sup> Yoko Ono, “The Word of a Fabricator,” essay, in *Yes Yoko Ono / Alexandra Munroe ; with Jon Hendricks ; with Essays by David A. Ross, Murray Sayle, Jann S. Wenner ; Contributions by Bruce Altshuler ... [et Al.]* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 285.

<sup>44</sup> Yoko Ono, “What Is the Relationship between The World and The Artist?,” essay, in *This Is Not Here* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse: Everson Museum of Art, 1971), 215.

individual level. An artist's power is to conjure realms of the imagination and foster them in real life.

Word Count: 3287



Fig 1. Yoko Ono, *White Chess Set (Play It By Trust)*, Sculpture, 1966, Tate Modern, London, <https://londonist.com/london/art-and-photography/yoko-ono-music-of-the-mind-tate-modern-review>.

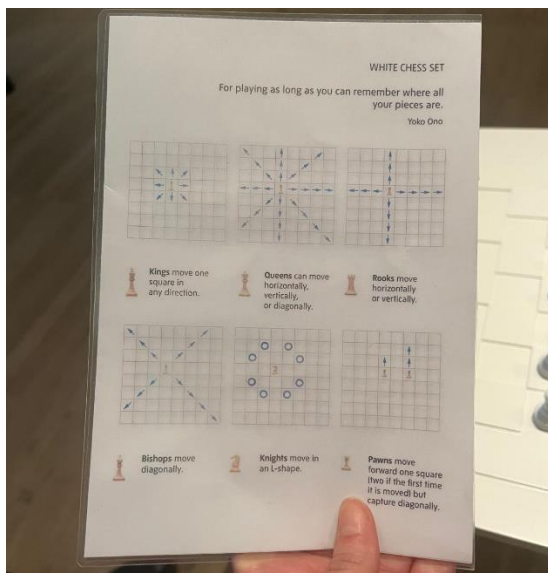


Fig 2. Yoko Ono, *White Chess Set (Play It By Trust)*, Detail, Sculpture, 1966, Tate Modern, London.

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