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Yoko Ono's Art in Remote Japan: Traveling Far to See the Sky

In a woodsy patch of a park tucked next to a stream, one of Yoko Ono's most unusual creations can be found in what is, for any artist's work, a most ~~397~~expected setting.

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Edward M. Gómez | October 8, 2016



The genkan, or entrance space, and etched, decorative glass in an upstairs room in the old house in which Yoko Ono's "Sky TV for Hokkaido" is installed (photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

SAPPORO, JAPAN — Here in the capital of Hokkaido, a large island that is also a prefecture in the far north of the Japanese archipelago, autumn has arrived on the heels of a typhoon, with flooding and damage in several rural towns and their surrounding farmland. Regular train service to the south-central part of the island has been temporarily suspended. It is the end of September, but the season of big storms is not yet over.

For now, one must take a bus to the area where the wind and rain hit hard in order to reach the town of Shimizu and the environs of the [Tokachi Millennium Forest](#). That verdant property in the foothills of the Hidaka Mountain Range is owned by Tokachi Mainichi Newspaper Company and used for an environmentally friendly, carbon-offset **397**forestation program.

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An unoccupied, traditional-style, Japanese residence in Tokachi Millennium Forest, which once housed a family of seven, is now a showcase for Yoko Ono's "Sky TV for Hokkaido" (1966/2005) (photos by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

Part of its nearly 1000-acre expanse has been transformed into a neatly landscaped park that is open to the public, with sights and diversions that include flower-filled and meadow gardens created by the British garden designer [Dan Pearson](#), restaurants, white goats grazing in storybook pastures, views of the nearby mountains, a cheese shop (selling products made with the resident grass-eaters' milk), and public artworks scattered around the grounds.



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Three of Yoko Ono's "Sky TV for Hokkaido" units set up in a room in an abandoned house in Tokachi Millennium Forest (photo by Yoshihiro Hagiwara)

It is here, in a woodsy patch of the park tucked next to a gurgling, freshwater stream, that one of Yoko Ono's most unusual creations can be found in what is, for any artist's work, a most unexpected setting. For it is in this remote outpost that a multi-unit iteration of Ono's emblematic "Sky TV" is to be found; she first expressed her concept for this work in writing (referring to it as "a furniture piece") with the words: "A closed circuit TV set up in the gallery for looking at the sky." "Sky TV" was first physically realized by Ono for her solo exhibition at Indica Gallery in London in 1966, and a little more than a decade ago, in a version known as "Sky TV for Hokkaido," dated 1966/2005, ~~357~~ was installed in the forest in northern Japan in an old, abandoned, Japanese-style ^{Shares} farmhouse.

When Ono presented this work fifty years ago, the use of video cameras for anything other than television broadcasting, never mind for works of art, was extremely rare; as it turned out, "Sky TV" became one of the pioneering experiments in what would become known as video art. The piece consists of a now old-fashioned, cathode-ray-tube television set onto whose screen is projected a live image of the sky captured by a closed-circuit video camera perched on a roof or another vantage point for viewing the sky. (A version of "Sky TV" was featured in the exhibition *Yoko Ono: One Woman Show, 1960-1971* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York last year.)



Yoko Ono's "Sky TV for Hokkaido" units set up on the ground floor of an uninhabited farmhouse in Tokachi Millennium Forest (photo by Yoshihiro Hagiwara)

In its corner of the forest park, the old wooden house, which originally bore a thatch roof and whose exterior is partly clad in galvanized sheet metal, welcomes visitors in its guise as a charming, slowly crumbling ruin, whose now-forgotten former residents — a family of seven who raised cattle and lived off the land — were considered pioneers at a time when Hokkaido was still regarded as something of a frontier territory. Despite their isolation, the house's occupants enjoyed certain modern conveniences, including running water in their kitchen and bathroom, pumped in from an underground well, and electricity produced by a hydro-generator installed in a nearby river.



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Visible deterioration inside the old house (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

In 1974, the family left the house and moved to the nearby city of Obihiro. Today, the aging structure, with its musty, shadowy, *tatami*-matted rooms, provides a mysterious, atmospheric stage for Ono's gentle intervention, which grew out of her participation in *Demeter*, an international art exhibition that took place at a horse-racing track in Obihiro in 2002. That event was put together by [P3 art and environment](#), a Tokyo-based cultural organization; that effort was spearheaded by its executive director, Takashi Serizawa, and its gallery director, Shinobu Ito. *Demeter* was the brainchild of Mitsushige Hayashi, the head of Tokachi Mainichi Newspaper Company, which served as its producer, along with other collaborators.

In that exhibition, Ono presented a first version of "Sky TV for Hokkaido" consisting of ~~387~~ ³⁸⁷ television sets, many of which had been donated by the island's residents. As Jon Hendricks, the artist's New York-based, longtime exhibitions curator writes in *Yoko Ono: Sky TV for Hokkaido* (2012), a photo-filled book about the Tokachi Millennium Forest's version of the work, the TV sets in the original *Demeter* presentation "were installed in small groups of eight, plus a single installation of one, in different interior and exterior spaces throughout the [racetrack's] workers' housing, stables, blacksmith[s'] shops, and other structures."



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A sole television set in the large, tatami-matted main room of an empty farmhouse is part of Yoko Ono's "Sky TV for Hokkaido" installation (photo by Yoshihiro Hagiwara)

Later, after that exhibition ended, Ono reused fifteen of the TV sets to create a version for the abandoned house. However, it took some clean-up and structural reinforcement of the old, weathered dwelling, though not a complete renovation, before the project could be installed.

I spoke with Hendricks in New York this past summer, at which time he told me that one of the biggest tasks he and his collaborators faced in transforming the house into a showcase for Ono's artwork was removing layers of unattractive, artificial-wood interior paneling and other "enhancements" that had been added over the years so that its original architectural character could be revealed.

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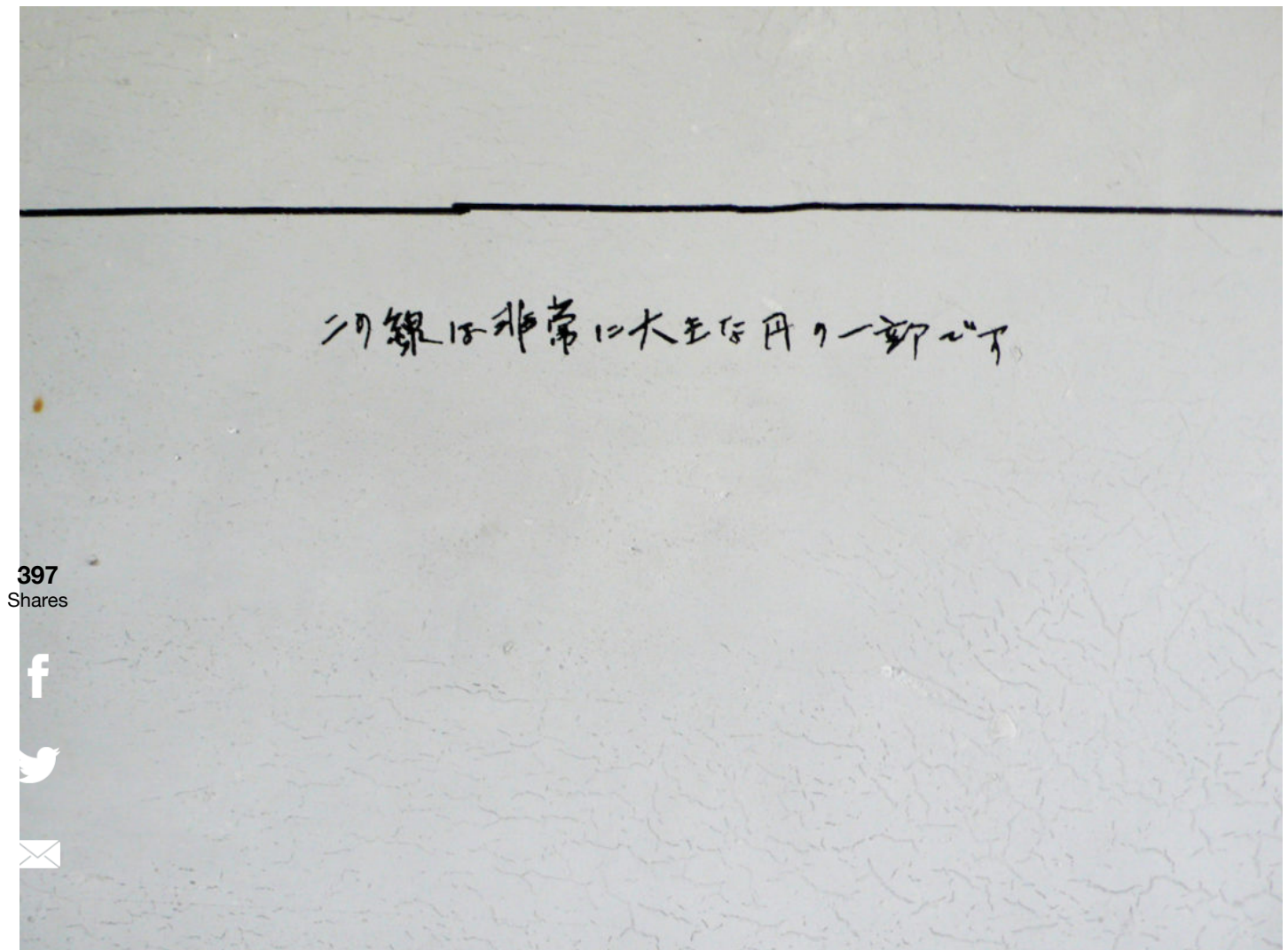
Jon Hendricks, the artist Yoko Ono's longtime exhibitions director, removing fake-wood paneling from the old house in Tokachi Millennium Forest in 2005 (photo by Daisuke Mikami)

In his text in *Yoko Ono: Sky TV for Hokkaido*, Hendricks recalls, “Gradually the soul of the house began to emerge.” A collaborator from Tokachi Mainichi Newspaper Company, he notes, managed to find old *tatami* mats, which they used to fill “nearly all the spaces that required them in the house.” Around the property, other workers cut down overgrown bamboo and “a tangle of vines and dead trees.” They “began to make discoveries,” Hendricks writes, including “scraggly cherry trees that had once been planted and now were nearly destroyed in their struggle to survive.” He remembers that “one of the most beautiful discoveries was an arm of earth that surrounded the windward side of the house.” About six feet high, this barrier had allowed “the wind to hit and bounce over the house to keep the drifting snow from burying it.”

Today, different configurations of now antique-looking Hitachi television sets, with their silver-gray plastic casings, appear in the various rooms of the house. They are all connected to a video camera perched atop a pole situated some 1640 feet away, which sends a feed to all of the sets of the same view of the sky. To be alone in any room of the otherwise empty house with nothing but a video image of the sky is to feel its spiritually uplifting power.

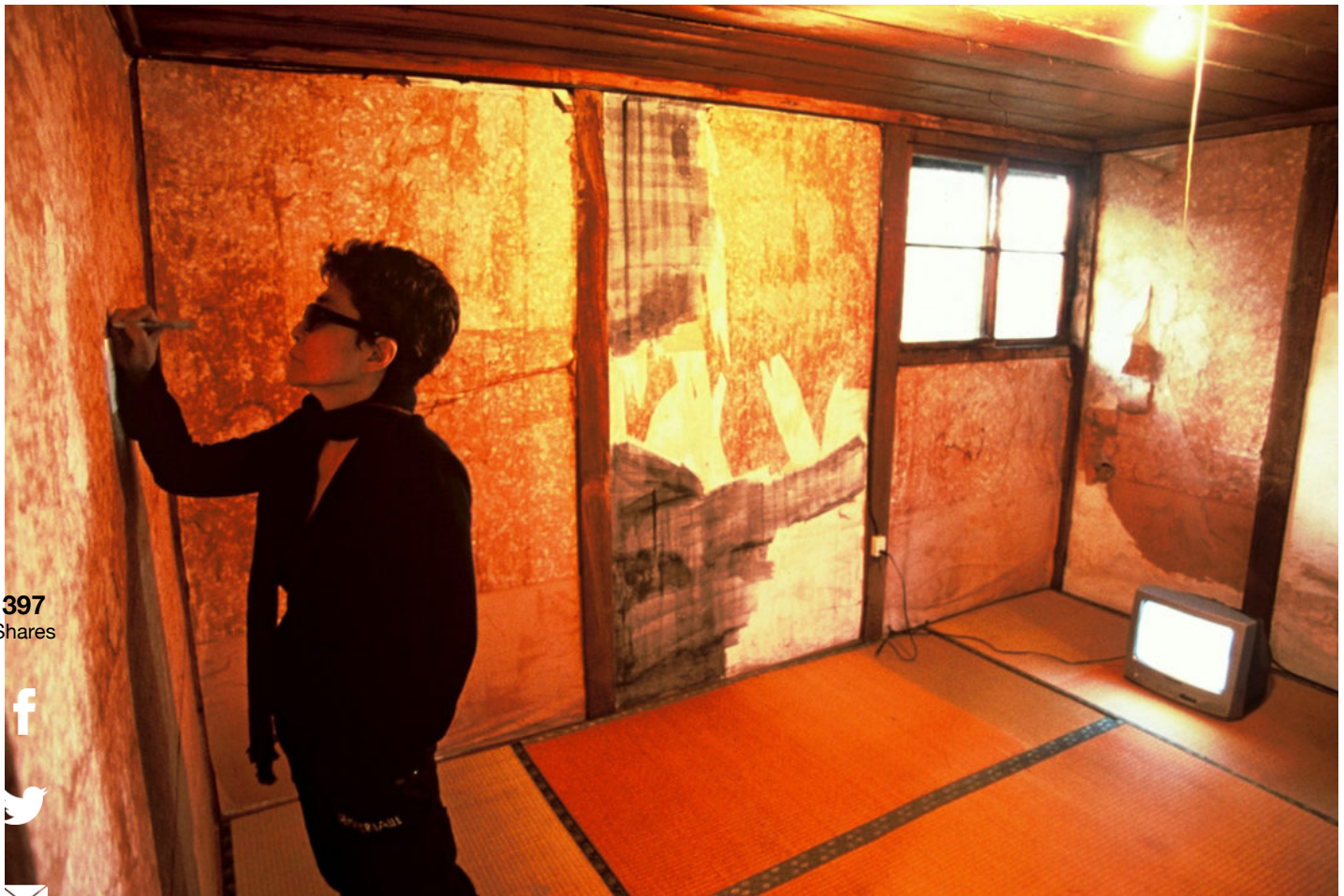
With their sense of ambient energy and intangible companionship as they provide a peculiar, fleeting form of “decoration” (in a strange way, Ono’s “Sky TV” units take the place of the artworks one would normally expect to encounter in such a traditional Japanese environment), the TV units emit the glow of a steady but ever-changing image, one that is as soothing and tranquil as ordinary television is jarring and annoying, turning each room into a kind of comfortable — and deeply comforting— meditation chamber.

In this isolated, almost unimaginable setting, given how ubiquitous video images have now become, it is easy to forget just how subversive Ono’s “Sky TV” originally was in its seizing control of the power of the broadcast image and the technology that produced it.



On the old house's interior walls, in 2005, Yoko Ono wrote by hand, in Japanese, the texts of her "Blue Room Event" (1996/2005); this statement says, "This line is a part of a very large circle" (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

At her organization's offices in Tokyo, P3 art and environment's Shinobu Ito told me, "In 2005, to inaugurate 'Sky TV for Hokkaido,' Yoko Ono visited the old house in Tokachi Millennium Forest and at that time also created a version of her 'Blue Room Event' inside." That word-based work, dated 1966/2005, consists of instructions written by the artist directly onto the peeling interior walls of the uninhabited farmhouse. They included such *koan*-like mind-benders as "This room slowly evaporates every day," "This is the ceiling," and "Find other rooms which exist in this space." Ono has written that she created "Blue Room Event" decades ago as "an act of rebellion" by "a woman who lived in a small apartment in New York City, where there was hardly a piece of furniture or small view from two small windows." Ultimately, this work suggests, all the *Lebensraum* you'll ever need is in your mind.



Yoko Ono, in 2005, creating her “Blue Room Event” (1996/2005) on the walls of the uninhabited farmhouse in Tokachi Millennium Forest in which her “Sky TV for Hokkaido” is installed (photo by Yoshihiro Hagiwara)

Ono's Hokkaido-forest project also includes a version of her “Wish Tree,” in which visitors are invited to write their wishes on little pieces of paper and tie them with string to a maple tree growing in front of the house. A few feet away, in the grass-covered earth, lies a realization of the artist's “Cloud Piece,” another text-based work from 1963, which states, “Imagine the clouds dripping. Dig a hole in your garden to put them in.” Also executed in 2005, the physical iteration of this conceptual work consists of a hole about two feet wide and about three feet deep, with a mirror at the bottom that reflects the image of the sky above.



A physical realization of Yoko Ono's "Cloud Piece," which she first offered as a written instruction work in 1963, was created in 2005 in the yard of the old house in Tokachi Millennium Forest where her "Sky TV for Hokkaido" is installed (photos by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

On the day of my visit, the park's gardeners lifted a protective metal lid covering the artwork and washed away leaves that had fallen onto the mirror during the recent storm. The leaves disappeared over the sides of the mirror into an ingeniously designed, invisible drain to reveal a sky view that resembled the image on the TV screens inside the house. The only sounds to be heard that afternoon in the garden were the rippling water of the nearby stream and the rustling of leaves in the breeze.

Throughout her oeuvre, Ono's works, many of which begin with short, instruction-based texts, are replete with references to sky, water, air, wind, and earth, and they certainly carry a poetic charge when they are reproduced in books or appear as physically realized objects. But to come upon such nature-themed artworks in, well, nature, is to appreciate their compelling oddness — and quirky charm — in new ways. If these are "earth works," there is nothing bombastic or aggressive about them (in contrast to the more assertive interventions of certain artists who have literally reshaped nature to suit their expressive purposes).

In his *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, the 17th-century Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō recalls telling an innkeeper somewhere along the way of his long walking journey that he had hoped the next day's weather would be bright and clear, only to be admonished by his host that "it is impossible to foretell the sky of tomorrow." That passage came to mind as I sat on the *tatami* in the old Hokkaido farmhouse, staring at Ono's silent screens. I had come a long way to watch TV — and even farther to become aware of the soul of the sky.

"Sky TV for Hokkaido" is open by appointment.

To reach Tokachi Millennium Forest in Hokkaido, Japan, travel by Japan Railway from Sapporo to Tokachi Shimizu Station, then take a taxi to the entrance of the park (taxi ride: approximately 20 minutes).

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