

# Remix: Here, There, and Everywhere (or the Three Faces of Yoko Ono, “Remix Artist”)

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*Yoko Ono is unusual in that she is a site of considerable activity in three distinct spaces where the term “remix” is in common use. This paper reviews her activity in these distinct remix spaces and examines the spaces for identifiable variations in the term’s resonances and meaning. First, the “here” of academia reflects academic conversations about remix and remix cultures that can be traced back to the mid 1990s. The second site is the site in which the general public first encountered the term “remix”—the “there” of music and music production. Within this space we pursue the shift from remix as a purely technical term occurring within the recording process to remix as an aesthetic term reflecting expanding and shifting aspirations for the composer of a remix. Finally, this paper will consider the “everywhere” of an Internet-based popular culture grounded in current social media.*

**Keywords:** bricolage, collage, mashup, remix, rhetoric

On January 19, 2017, the song at the top of the Billboard Dance Charts was a remix, formally titled “Hell in Paradise 2016 – Kue Remix.”<sup>1</sup> Though credited to ONO, the vocalist and artist at the heart of the project is Yoko Ono, and by topping the dance club charts with this version of the song, Yoko Ono achieved one of the most remarkable feats in the history of commercial music.

Over the course of 31 years, Ono was able to take *three separate versions* of the same song to the Top 20 of Billboard’s Dance Club Song charts. In 1985 a Bill Laswell remix of the initial “Hell in Paradise” track (from Ono’s “Starpeace” LP) made it to #12. In 2004, Ono released an EP consisting of 3-7 additional remixes of the song (the number of tracks varied by format), and one of these 2004 remixes made it to #4. The chart-topping 2017 remix was an outgrowth of the “Yes, I’m A Witch Too” album (released February 2016) which featured 17 remixed Yoko Ono songs, including yet another version of “Hell in Paradise” by Moby. As the title suggests, “Yes I’m a Witch Too” was not Ono’s first remix compilation. It was in fact her *fifth* full-length album dedicated to dance remixes of her solo work including 2012’s 30-track “Onomix” which aggregated her nine #1 club tracks to that point.

Perhaps fueled by interest in the Moby remix, in December 2016 ONO released the first of two album-length compilations of dance remixes of “Hell in Paradise” titled “Hell in Paradise 2016, Part 1.” This was rapidly followed by “Hell in Paradise 2016, Part 2” in January of 2017. In a nod to her Fluxus roots, these two albums consist of 22 songs *all* of which are titled “Hell in Paradise 2016 -” with a brief description following the dash (e.g. “Mr. A Remix” and “Mike Cruz Dub”). For those keeping score at home, this means ONO released *twenty-three* distinct and lengthy dance remixes of “Hell in Paradise” within the space of a year, all based on an initial three minute and

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Murray, “The Chainsmokers Debut on Hot Dance/Electronic Songs With ‘Paris,’” *Billboard*, January 19, 2017, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/7662367/the-chainsmokers-paris-hot-dance-electronic-songs-chart-debut>.

twenty-seven second song from a 1985 album that was so poorly received at that time of its release that Ono subsequently withdrew from making music for over a decade.

Yoko Ono is now 83 years old. “Hell in Paradise 2016” (released in 2017) is Ono’s *thirteenth* entry onto the Billboard dance charts placing her — as of this writing — at #11 on Billboard’s “Greatest of All Time Dance Club Artists.”<sup>2</sup> “Hell in Paradise 2016” is still on the charts as I write. We are no longer free to understand the initial track as merely a song. Rather, it now must be seen as a hub of activity, a fertile foundation for an ever-expanding “Hell in Paradise” remix constellation that seems to renew itself in ways that connect with a broad audience roughly every decade (and there are even more remixes of “Hell in Paradise” that did not chart — a full accounting of all of these remixes might well take up much of the space allotted for this article).

But as fascinating as the “Hell in Paradise” nexus is, this is *not* the type of remix that typically garners sustained academic attention. And this is because the academic study of remix has migrated away from understanding remix as foundationally musical phenomenon to a study of remix as an array of appropriative rhetorical strategies most commonly executed within digital spaces. In other words, for most academics, the tool by which remixes are most commonly executed is not a mixing board but a laptop. In short, the foundational, analog, and expressly musical meaning of “remix” has given way to an expressly *networked digital* meaning. In her 2015 essay “The Extended Remix: Rhetoric and History” Margie Borschke efficiently emphasizes the focus points emphasized by this shift:

Although early remixes were produced using analog technologies, contemporary discourse tends to associate “remix” and “remix culture” with digital practices and artifacts. As such, remix is now associated with cut/copy/paste technologies, challenges to copyright and intellectual property, participatory media, grassroots social and political empowerment, social networking, user generated content, and “commons-based peer production.”<sup>3</sup>

I join with Borschke in arguing that there are significant divisions among the spaces that taken together constitute the “contemporary discourse” to which Borschke here refers (or as she later writes: “current narratives about remix and its underlying values are at odds with the particular history of remix as a musical practice and artifact”<sup>4</sup>). This is apparent even within the immediate context surrounding Borschke’s essay. Borschke’s essay is one of 41 in the 2015 edited anthology *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, edited by Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough.<sup>5</sup> In this volume, references to music and musical practice are overwhelmingly concentrated in volume’s Part 1, designated as “History.” By contrast, references to art and the internet are relatively common throughout all of the collection’s five parts (History/Aesthetics/Ethics/Politics/Practice) and the fourth part is obviously expressly dedicated to remix as a form of political action. This suggests at least the possibility that the “remix” and “remix cultures” discussed within academic circles are potentially at odds with at the ways the term “remix” is used within and in relation to music, and further, that the points of emphasis usually favored by academics might also be at odds with how “remix” is understood outside the academy more generally.

<sup>2</sup> “Greatest of All Time Top Dance Club Artists: Page 1,” *Billboard*, December 1, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.billboard.com/charts/greatest-top-dance-club-artists>.

<sup>3</sup> Margie Borschke. “The Extended Remix: Rhetoric and History,” in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 104.

<sup>4</sup> Borschke. “The Extended Remix,” 104.

<sup>5</sup> I am also a contributor to *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*.

This paper seeks to explore Yoko Ono's expansive career as an artist — broadly understood — as a means of illuminating three distinct sites where the term “remix” is used. Further *how* Ono and her work are appropriated, portrayed, and addressed point up key differences in remix rhetorics across these sites. Indeed, seeing Ono in relation to remix provides examples of identifiable variations in the term's resonances and meanings.

I will first examine the “here” of academia, an academic conversation about remix and remix cultures that can be traced back to the mid 1990s. The “we” participating in this special issue are constructing a “here” within academia that favors some of the resonances within the term “remix” over others. This paper addresses and seeks to account for those preferred meanings. The second site is the initial site in which the public encountered the term, the “there” of music and music production focusing in particular on the shift from remix as a purely technical term occurring within the recording process, to remix as a musical product, reflecting expanding and shifting aspirations for the composer of a remix. Finally, this paper will consider the “everywhere” of an Internet-based popular culture in which discussions and understandings of remix are driven by a wave of documentaries on the topic, and how these demonstrably popular projects may be shaping a view of “remix” that is distinct from the work occurring in spaces like this journal.

### **Here: Remix in Academia**

*I need my remix to be here  
Here, remixing each day of the year*

Yoko Ono shows up with some regularity in scholarly articles and edited collections addressing remix as a cultural phenomenon, but these references commonly isolate aspects of her artistic career prior to 1970 as emblematic of Ono's general orientation toward practices that *would become* central to an academic construction of remix that can be timestamped to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. And that is only if Ono's work is addressed at all.

In *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, which constitutes a convenient sample of current scholarship across a range of disciplines, Ono materializes only in a fleeting reference to her participation in the Bed-In protests with her husband, John Lennon, in 1969.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Kembrew McLeod's book *Freedom of Expression* offers an example of scholarly accounts of Ono as having a leading role in developing artistic work that participates in a through-line stretching from Dada to contemporary remix:

Yoko Ono introduced John Lennon to magnetic-tape sound collage, and their collaborative piece used dozens of unauthorized fragments from radio, television, and other sources. . . . Ono wasn't the grasping groupie that many people thought she was, but rather but rather an artist who was well established long before she met Lennon (they met when he came to *her* art show). Ono had previously collaborated with Ornette Coleman and John Cage, among others, and she had deep ties with the Fluxus art movement, which was inspired by Dadaism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> J. Meryl Krieger, “The Politics of John Lennon's ‘Imagine’: Contextualizing the Roles of Mashups and New Media in Political Protest,” in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Kembrew McLeod, *Freedom of Expression®: Overzealous Copyright Bozos and Other Enemies of Creativity* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 152.

McLeod's work is unusual in that it embraces Ono as both musician *and* visual/conceptual artist. More commonly it is Ono's non-musical artistry that is identified as ancestral to contemporary constructions of remix. Barbara Bergstrom, writing in an exchange with her co-author R. Darden Bradshaw, situates Ono as having executed remix artwork as early as Ono's 1962 "Instruction Paintings" in which Ono typically offered austere sans serif text on a plain white background guiding the viewer to "drill a hole in the sky" or "place a broken sewing machine in a glass tank ten or twenty times larger than the machine." Bergstrom writes:

I recall one of my favorite part time jobs, working as a librarian's assistant at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. There, my passion for the Fluxus art movement exploded as I routinely experienced the works John Cage, Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins, and Charlotte Moorman. These artists and their work, like Yoko Ono's Instruction paintings, are remix, right?<sup>8</sup>

Scholarship that acknowledges the possibility of linking Ono's pre-1970 work — understood of as at least anticipatory to contemporary remix — more directly to Ono's current wave of so-named musical remixes is *exceedingly rare* and *extremely recent*. In a December 2016 article in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* titled "Abstraction and Embodiment: Yoko Ono and the Weaving of Global Musical Networks" Barry Shank is able to pull together the strands of Ono's conceptual art, Ono's various musical collaborations with John Lennon, Ono's solo musical career, and Ono's recent resurgence as the central node in an ever expanding network of remixes. Shank argues that Ono's work is particularly appealing to contemporary DJs specifically because they understand her work as inherently hybrid and transgressive:

Against the rock-disco background, structured by the black/white binary that has defined so much of Anglo-American pop, she vomited up a refusal of the categories that were offered her. In so doing, she drew upon Japanese traditions, but she did so not in order to make a claim about Japanese or Asian-American identity. Instead, the convergence of these traditions set the terms for a resistance to the concept of identity, which remains an always inadequate means of acknowledging the necessity of interpersonal connections.<sup>9</sup>

Shank's conclusion points up the degree to which the fluidity of Ono's identity lends itself to the specifics of contemporary remix.

Ono's abstract reorganization of the gendered and racialized aspects of her performances opened her music to the re-creative work of these DJs. Under new conditions of authorship, her screams against the sky became the soundtrack for the remixed bodies of our time.<sup>10</sup>

The tendency within academia to focus on Ono as *ancestral* to contemporary remix rather than *participating* in remix is indicative of the degree to which remix scholarship and remix as a musical phenomenon have separated from one another. So if academics tend not to talk about music when they talk about remix, then what is their "remix" about?

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<sup>8</sup> R. Darden Bradshaw and Barbara Bergstrom, "Tangling in Remix," *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* 32 (2015): <http://www.jcrae.org/journal/index.php/jcrae/issue/view/5>.

<sup>9</sup> Barry Shank, "Abstraction and Embodiment: Yoko Ono and the Weaving of Global Musical Networks," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 18: (2006): 295. doi:10.1111/j.1533-1598.2006.00095.x

<sup>10</sup> Shank, "Abstraction and Embodiment," 297.

Lawrence Lessig's scholarly work plays an especially significant role in shaping academic conversations about remix, in particular because he wrote an extremely popular 2008 book titled "Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy."<sup>11</sup> Lessig is a Harvard Law professor with a baseline commitment to questions of copyright and the proprietization of ideas. In 2001, Lessig founded Creative Commons, an organization dedicated to unbundling the rights aggregated within copyright, and promoting a more flexible approach to the use and circulation of ideas. Though his work has, in recent years, shifted to directly political arguments (including a modestly-scaled run for President of the United States in 2016) Lessig remains a go-to "talking head" within a recent spate of documentaries addressing copyright and remix.

Lessig's first three books on the intersections of the internet and copyright law, published from 1999-2004, speak of mixes, but never use the term "remix." But around the time he was speaking in support of his 2004 book "Free Culture,"<sup>12</sup> Lessig began to both use and explain the term. In a November, 2004 talk at the Virginia School of Law, Lessig offers a clear dividing line that has not always been maintained:

Mix is the idea of taking ideas, expressions, putting them together and making something. [...] Remix is the practice by which others take that [mix] and re-express it. Culture is remix. Knowledge is remix. Politics is remix. Everyone in the life of producing and creating engages in this practice of remix.<sup>13</sup>

Lessig's approach here is notable in that it posits a foundational "mix" which is subsequently taken up *by others* (and implicitly these others are disconnected from the site and process of the initial mix). This approach neatly distinguishes between the initial mix of, for example, a pop song and the extended dance remix. While there might be substantial remixing involved to achieve that foundational final mix, that effort is *remixing to produce a mix*. When others take up that mix for the purpose of *re-expressing* that is *remixing to produce a remix*. But Lessig's approach here also raises a question about what ought to count as "re-expression."

Lessig's later work on the topic is suggestive of a clear bias toward remixes that reflect high degrees of creativity (and thus re-expression) rather than extended dance remixes which are in some cases fairly described as "same expression, but *longer*." For scholars like Lessig, the greater the distances traversed, logistically and conceptually, the greater the likelihood that we are experiencing a remix worthy of the name.

Writing in January of this year, Annette Markham is able to add an additional element of clarity to what remix might *now* mean within academic circles by contrasting remix with a word that at first appears to be a near synonym: *bricolage*. Markham writes:

Whether in initial or later usage, bricolage as a concept seems to value most highly the outcome or product of the bricoleur. We can conceptualize and use bricolage as an attitude and process, of course, but the outcome is where the value and impact of bricolage lies.

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<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009). Full text available at: <https://archive.org/stream/LawrenceLessigRemix/Remix-o.txt>.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Creativity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004). Full text available at: <http://www.free-culture.cc/freeculture.pdf>.

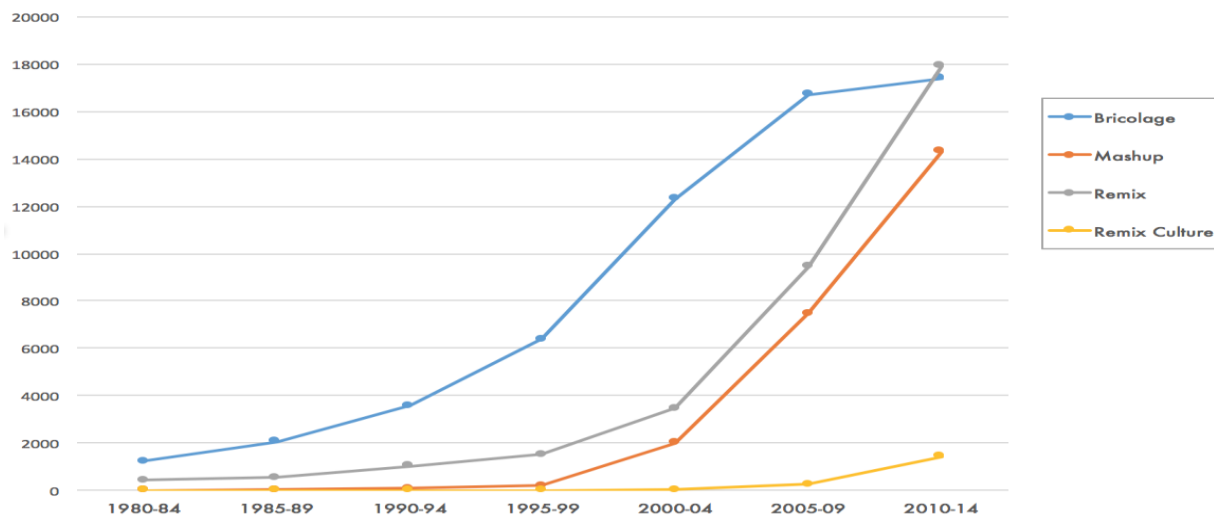
<sup>13</sup> Michael Marshall, "Remix Is a Cultural Right, Lessig Says," *News & Media, University of Virginia College of Law*, November 18, 2004, accessed February 3, 2017, [http://content.law.virginia.edu/news/2004\\_fall/lessig.htm](http://content.law.virginia.edu/news/2004_fall/lessig.htm).

I see this more clearly when I compare bricolage to remix, where the focus is on the ongoing and inherently unfinished process of remixing. If we look to the work of contemporary remix theorists, the attention on products and outcomes notwithstanding, there is a temporary quality that renders remix powerful. A meme is not a meme unless it morphs into something else and travels beyond its original conception.<sup>14</sup>

13 years elapsed between Lessig’s initial formulation of remix as a practice of re-expression of others’ word and Markham’s helpful observation that the emphasis on *process* rather than *product* (or perhaps the producer) is, perhaps, what distinguishes remix from bricolage. In those 13 years the internet effectively quadrupled, moving from the periphery of the media landscape to the center. Markham’s chosen example, the meme, is widely understood as an internet-specific genre (though the concept clearly predates the internet). Markham’s argument suggests the degree to which remix is being used as a *substitute* for bricolage in contemporary scholarship. Though Markham’s overt purpose is to pry the two terms apart in hopes of addressing each with greater precision, a rough statistical review of the frequency with which the terms have been used in recent scholarship suggests that remix might be “eating” bricolage.

Indeed, if we look at frequency of occurrence in Google Scholar-indexed articles, we can see that the terms “bricolage,” “remix,” and “mashup” have *all* experienced an explosion of use over the past quarter century. That said, “bricolage” has — over the last decade — clearly started to level off even as “remix” and “mashup” continue to trend dramatically higher, with “remix” having exceeded “bricolage” over the last five years, and “mashup” on track to do so at around the time this article is published.<sup>15</sup>

**Incidence of "Remix" and related terms in scholarly articles  
1980-2014 (according to Google Scholar searches)**



<sup>14</sup> Annette Markham, “Bricolage: A Keyword in Remix Studies,” *AnnetteMarkham.com* (web log), January 4, 2017, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://annettemarkham.com/2017/01/bricolage-a-keyword-in-remix-studies>.

<sup>15</sup> It must be acknowledged that Google Scholar searches are a crude instrument for this purpose, with flaws that could only be partially addressed for the purposes of this project. For example, searches for “Remix Culture” in the 1980s routinely delivered the title of a 2013 article which had somehow been indexed as having appeared decades prior to its publication. Additionally, Google Scholar collapses articles with citations to articles so, for example, citations to an article that mentions remix in its title might be tracked even if those citations are on an unrelated topic. All of this conceded, the trends that emerge from reviewing the four keywords in five-year slices are absolutely unmistakable.

Some additional insights emerge from this data:

- *Bricolage* is identifiable as both the predecessor of “remix” and the favored term within academia for discussions of non-musical collage compositions until very recently.
- *Remix* is not only supplanting *bricolage* but also likely prompting a broader discussion of collage composition in a variety of media.
- *Mashup* as a descriptive term for a specific kind of remix was rarely discussed prior to 2000 but has experienced a tremendous spike in interest since then.
- *Remix Culture* as an area of academic focus can be dated — definitively — to 1999 when the term was first used in a wave of articles growing out of an ethnomusicology conference.

Thus “remix” a term which was initially expressly musical in both reference and scope is becoming a favored term for non-musical collage composition even as it remains forever rooted in its initial musical meaning. But even if we narrow the scope to music alone, “remix” remains a remarkably malleable concept.

### **There: Remix as an Expressly Musical Term**

*There, running my hands through her remix  
Both of us thinking how good it can be  
Someone is remixing, but she doesn't know he's there*

The ONO remix of “Hell in Paradise” is within its context, exemplary. The instrumentation from the original single is abandoned in favor of a circulating warm ambient waves of chords and whooshes. Ono’s original vocal is run through auto-tune, becoming somehow both robotic and angelic. All of this is layered over a pulsing club beat. Even if it’s not a listener’s particular cup of tea, the elements that made it successful as a club track are readily apparent.

But Yoko Ono’s substantial career as the central node in an ever-expanding corpus of extremely popular dance club remixes of her earlier work has not been the subject of significant scholarly attention. Thus, while Ono’s more general work as artist and activist is the basis for thousands of scholarly articles, it falls to publications like *Rolling Stone* to address this latest phase of her artistic career in articles like 2011’s “Yoko Ono’s Surprise Rebirth as a Dance Music Icon,” which was prompted by a string of six consecutive number one hit remixes. This may be attributable to her lack of participation in the production of these remixes. Ono has been open about her minimal involvement in the production of these tracks:

I’m not involved at all. I send it to people who want to remix it. Especially with “Give Peace a Chance,” there were many serious people interested. We even got calls from China and Russia, so we said, “Please try.” I’m not involved or saying, “don’t do this,” I’m just receiving it.<sup>16</sup>

And yet in the ways music promotion and journalism keeps score, these remixes are *hers*. Notwithstanding the fact that these remixes are — exclusive of the original vocals — the work products of an array of producers who received no direct guidance from Ono, the primary credit is given to ONO and the identities of the many remixers involved in the ongoing remix project are,

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<sup>16</sup> Josh Rocker, “Yoko Ono Interview: Gay.Com,” *Imagine Peace*, November 07, 2008, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://imaginepeace.com/archives/811>.

by contrast, relatively submerged. This is not uncommon in the broader landscape of remix and mashup compositions. The initial point of attribution is often that a track is a remix of a given performer's work, or this is a mashup of this performer vs. that performer. A subset of remix performers from Grandmaster Flash to Girl Talk (both of whom excel in live remix) have managed to flip this script, but in general the remixee rather than the remixer is the main attraction.

So in the case of "Hell in Paradise" we have an original song, written and sung by Yoko Ono and initially produced by Bill Laswell in coordination with Ono during the recording of the "Starpeace" album. We have an initial remix by Laswell shortly thereafter. And then we have a wave after wave of remixes with presumably declining hands-on involvement until we reach a point where Ono comfortably acknowledges that she has no real involvement with an apparently ever-expanding pool of remixes other than — perhaps — critical assessment as to which are suitable for release. The upshot is that within dance music circles, Yoko Ono is a celebrated artist known for a string of extremely popular dance remixes while publicly stating that she does not herself remix music.

Making sense of this superficially paradoxical circumstance becomes possible when understanding the many applications of remix. One important step in this effort is prying apart remix as a noun and remix as a verb. While each informs the other's meaning, the verb is more closely anchored to music recording studio practices of the 1960s (growing out of the development of multitrack recording in 1955). Importantly, remixing as a verb predates the notion of a remix as an end product. Indeed, remixing was initially understood as a specific type of "mixing down," the process of delivering aesthetically balanced individual tracks to a multitrack master tape. One might have an initial mix, cut it to an acetate master (approximating the eventual vinyl record's sound) and realize at that point that more reverb would enrich the sound. Thus, back to the mixing board for a remix. While the term remix had a past life within the context of concrete production, the music studios of the 1960s are home to the meanings of the words that are ancestral to our current usage.

The Oxford English Dictionary identifies the first identifiable print use of the term as a verb relating to sound production as from *DB* in December of 1967: "He [i.e. an engineer] can revise or remix any of the tracks without destroying those that do not need further work." Notably this use of the verb was in just the second issue of *db: the sound engineering magazine*, in an article by Richard Vorisek titled "Modern Mixing Techniques Boost Efficiency."<sup>17</sup> "Remix(ing)" actually appears four times in the article and is presented in ways that suggest it might have been commonly understood and likely to be recognized by the anticipated readership of the magazine.

The *OED* lists the first print use of remix as a noun as being from *Audio* in June of 1969: "The expression 're-mix' is a current variation of the earlier 're-recording.'"<sup>18</sup> The hyphen charmingly underscores the tentativeness with which *Audio* was putting forward the term. As of 1969 there was tentative acknowledgement that the action of remixing might indeed result in an end product, but the term here seems provisional and carries with it no specific sense of artistic effort over and above the technical skill required to deliver a proper mix.

Sitting neatly in between these two definitions, in May of 1968, is Lennon, Ono, and George Harrison's composition of the track Kembrew McLeod refers to as both "the most famous example

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Vorisek, "Modern Mixing Techniques Boost Efficiency," *Db: The Sound Engineering Magazine*, December 1967, 13-15. Full text available at: <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-DB-Magazine/60s/DB-1967-12.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> "remix, n.," *OED Online*, June 2017. Oxford University Press. (accessed September 11, 2017).



of *musique concrète*” and a “magnetic-tape sound collage” (above): “Revolution 9” from the album *The Beatles*, commonly known as “The White Album.” The construction of this 8-minute track includes at least 45 separate sources, including tape loops, sound effects, and snatches of Beethoven, Schumann, and Sibelius. While the current academic understandings of remix and remix cultures would readily accommodate a composition with parallel modes of construction, at the point of its composition “Revolution 9” existed outside the then available definitions of the term.

Yoko Ono’s pathway from proto-remix *musique concrète* exemplar to her current status as hands-off dance remix icon speaks to a remix history that is weighted more heavily toward the remix cultures of the gay dance club scene of the early 1970s than it is toward the relatively well-traveled narrative of remix as a foundational element in the birth of rap and hip-hop culture in the Bronx and Brooklyn later in the same decade. This initial wave of extended dance remixes in both of these spaces usually falls short of the standards that are prized within academic accounts of remix because the elements of the remix are either nothing more than the constituent parts of an original mix, repeated, or the addition of a few complementary beats. While the most danceable elements of the song are repeated and extended, the level of *contrast* between the initial mix and the remix is so low that Lessig’s standard of “re-expression” is only marginally met. That said, over time the remixes of Ono’s work have tended to become increasingly transformative, to the point where tracks with effectively the same titles are barely recognizable as sharing the same song as a root. In the case of the Yoko Ono dance remixes, Ono is overwhelmingly only responsible for what Lessig terms the mix (“the idea of taking ideas, expressions, putting them together and making something”). And Ono specifically denies participating in the remixes (“the practice[s] by which others take that [mix] and re-express it”). Thus, ironically, the remixes most directly attributed to Ono are, by her own testimony, the ones in which she arguably has the most minimal participation.

### **Everywhere: Remix in the Wild**

*But to remix is to need remix everywhere  
Knowing that remix is to share*

On November 11, 2016, in the immediate wake of the United State election, Yoko Ono posted an audio track to Twitter accompanied by a brief message which read: “Dear Friends, I would like to share this message with you as my response to @realDonaldTrump love, yoko.”<sup>19</sup> The audio file was a 19 second long scream, in Ono’s signature wavering and guttural style. Ono’s tweet went viral and has since been viewed 1.97 million times. Inevitably, the scream itself has become a site for remixes, including a remix called Yoko Riddim by DJ Rushmore.<sup>20</sup> Vice’s Thump described the remix in the following terms: “Where Ono’s original sounds simultaneously full of despair and ready to fight, here it is chopped up and edited almost like a chant, paired with a beat that oozes ballroom swagger.”<sup>21</sup> Another remix, titled, “Yoko Ono’s 10

<sup>19</sup> Yoko Ono, Twitter post, November 11, 2016, 1:21pm, <https://twitter.com/yokoono/status/797187458505080834?lang=en>.

<sup>20</sup> Rushmore “Yoko Riddim.” *SoundCloud audio*, 3:49, November, 2017. <http://www.soundcloud.com/oscarthepenguin/root-beer-floats>.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Iadarola, “Rushmore Remixed Yoko Ono Screaming in Response to Trump’s Victory,” *Thump*, November 14, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, [https://thump.vice.com/en\\_ca/track/rushmore-yoko-ono-trump-song](https://thump.vice.com/en_ca/track/rushmore-yoko-ono-trump-song).

hour-long response to Trump’s victory” simply loops the original 19-second scream for 600 minutes.<sup>22</sup>

Prior to the Trump response, another Ono vocal performance had been a particularly popular site for remix artists. In July of 2010, Ono performed VOICE PIECE FOR SOPRANO & WISH TREE at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>23</sup> MoMA posted a video of the performance to YouTube on July 27, 2010. Because Ono performed *a capella* and delivered her characteristically aggressive wordless vocalizations, this performance was easily mashed and remixed with backing tracks, which were then presented as “covers” of, for example, Katy Perry,<sup>24</sup> Adele,<sup>25</sup> Iron Maiden,<sup>26</sup> Daft Punk,<sup>27</sup> Psy’s “Gangnam Style,”<sup>28</sup> and Yoko Ono [Screaming Goat Edition].<sup>29</sup> In the wake of the election, another remixer cut up unflattering excerpts from Donald Trump’s campaign appearances and intercut them with Ono’s performance, re-presenting them as a sort of “debate” (neither Ono nor Trump fares especially well).<sup>30</sup> Ono’s distinctive vocal performances — whether traditionally musical or not — have proven irresistible to remix artists of varying types with varying goals. What this means in practical terms is that Yoko Ono the remix artist is competing with Yoko Ono the remix object in spaces like YouTube.

Further, Ono’s public personae have also been a site of continual remix activities including meme templates that are grounded in the long-standing charge that she was personally responsible for the breakup of The Beatles. In the examples below, Ono’s late 1960s persona is being remixed into an example of the “Advice Animal” meme genre. The specific image of Ono was posted to memegenerator.net without attribution or acknowledgment of the original context (it appears to be a still from Ono’s 1967 “smilesfilm”).

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Roberts, “Yoko Ono’s 10 Hour-Long Response to Trump’s Victory,” *YouTube*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGmd4ZIVrWY>.

<sup>23</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, “Voice Piece For Soprano & Wish Tree at MoMA, Summer 2010 by yoko ono,” *YouTube*, July 27, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GMHI7bmlzw>.

<sup>24</sup> forthedishwasher, “Albert Maysles and David Maysles - Yoko Ono: Cut Piece (1966) - 480p,” *YouTube*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTGSsWVK2Eo>.

<sup>25</sup> Kroiker McGuire, “Someone Like You by Adele (Yoko Ono cover),” *YouTube*, June 5, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsgMbxyDmCY>.

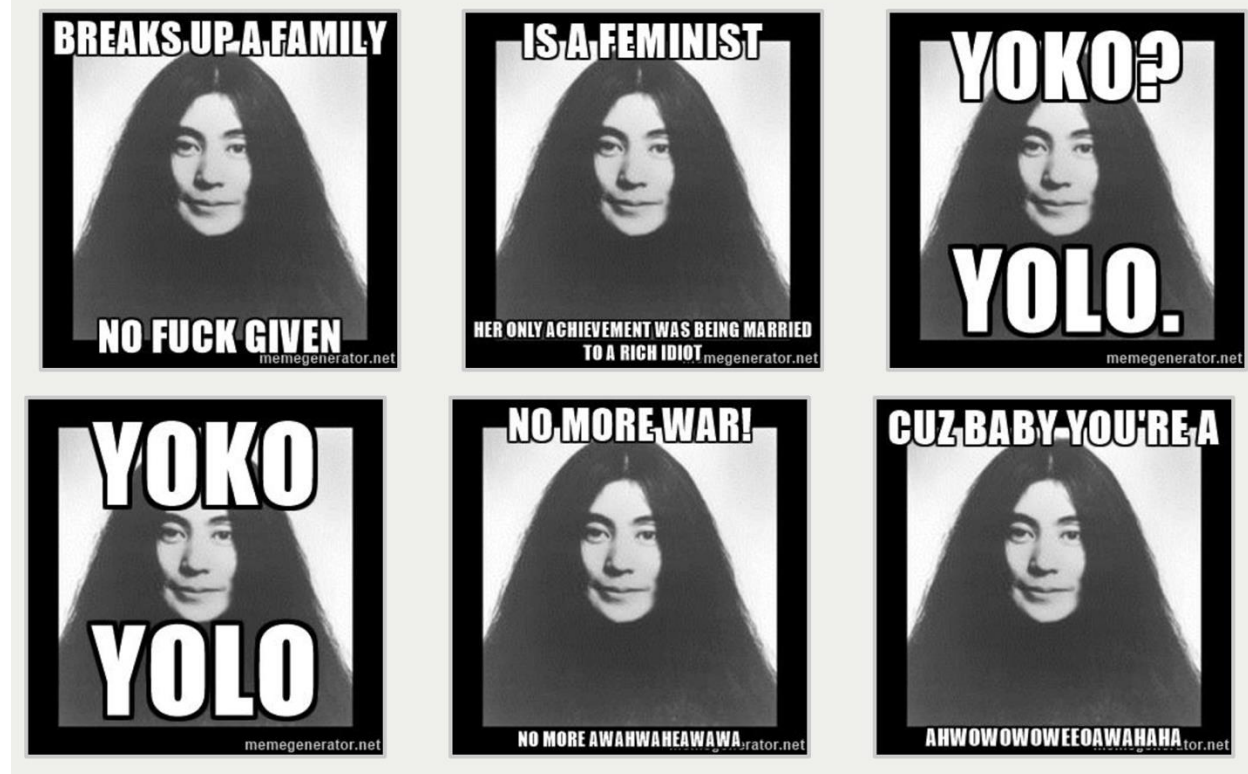
<sup>26</sup> eduardoai5, “Yoko Ono Sings IRON MAIDEN,” *YouTube*, September 6, 2010, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjl7QZc\\_GYM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjl7QZc_GYM).

<sup>27</sup> Topito, “Yoko Ono - Get Lucky (Daft Punk cover),” *YouTube*, December 5, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4Et1DSM6VY>.

<sup>28</sup> La MeriendaCena, “Yoko Ono singing Gangnam Style,” *YouTube*, December 11, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqfCZHekToI>.

<sup>29</sup> Craig Owens, “Yoko Ono Screaming [Goat Edition],” *YouTube*, March 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMHniVpoIwA>.

<sup>30</sup> RichardofJonestown2, “President Trump vs Yoko Ono Battle,” *YouTube*, December 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5apcQk0cSQ>.



Outside of the academy, where Ono is examined primarily as an artist anticipatory of contemporary remix practices, and outside of dance music circles, where Ono is one of the most successful remix artists of all time, Ono remains a vocal curiosity, a reputed homewrecker, and an object of ridicule. In all of these cases, Ono's own artistic efforts are substantially removed from her participation in the various types of remixes. She either anticipatory of remix or is the object of remix but — one way or another — Ono never wholly *owns* her participation in any of remixes she has prompted. And indeed, if we follow Lessig, she ought not, as it is the uptake and re-expression *by others* that is at the heart of contemporary remix. But this uptake routinely depends on at least technical violations of U.S. law. The rise of remix has occurred against a backdrop of increasingly rampant copyright violation within social media. The overwhelming majority of memes circulating on Twitter and Facebook — like the Ono meme directly above — involve the appropriation of images that are protected by copyright. In one infamous case, the penguin photograph at the heart of the popular “Socially Awkward Penguin” meme prompted Getty Images to sue an obscure blog over the re-use of the penguin images at the heart of the meme (which originally appeared in *National Geographic*). In a particularly engaging article for the *Washington Post* titled “How Copyright is Killing Your Favorite Memes” Caitlin Dewey repeatedly refers to this simple meme as a form of remix: “In the six years that Getty and National Geographic have allowed the meme to flourish, it has far transcended Mobley’s original photo: *It’s a remix, a discourse, a pastiche assembled — like so much of popular Internet culture! — from the aggregated efforts of millions of people.*”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Caitlin Dewey, “How Copyright is Killing Your Favorite Memes,” *Washington Post*, September 8, 2015, accessed February 3, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/09/08/how-copyright-is-killing-your-favorite-memes/?utm\\_term=.c7d676442995](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/09/08/how-copyright-is-killing-your-favorite-memes/?utm_term=.c7d676442995).

The elements of the Socially Awkward Penguin meme are so few that they can be easily counted on a penguin's toes. First, the *National Geographic* image of the penguin is front and center. Second, the penguin appears before a square background made up of eight triangles of slightly varied shades of blue (this background is common to the "advice animals" meme genre). Third, the thoughts or speech of the penguin are presented in large type, usually the Impact font favored in most memes of this type (and used in the above Ono advice-animal-styled examples. In all of the iterations of the meme, the only element that changes is the type. The graphic content remains constant (with the notable exception of a cartoon penguin that was substituted for the original photograph after Getty began pursuing those hosting or circulating versions of the meme). So while Dewey confidently labels this "remix" the only element that is in any way "remixed" is the text. Indeed, if we were to point to a threshold beneath which something clearly *is not* a remix, the Socially Awkward Penguin meme (and its advice animal peers) would appear to occupy the boundary.

This becomes clear with analogy to music. Within musical spaces remix is understood as a significant rearrangement of existing materials, often complemented by the introduction of new materials (and the erasure of some existing materials). The advice animal memes, by contrast, are far closer to karaoke. The "backing track" remains constant. The question at hand is what the "singer" will be able to do in response to that familiar backing track. Put another way, when one or two lines of text is substituted for another in the Surprisingly Awkward Penguin meme, what (if anything) has been mixed?

To the extent that it is now not merely possible but commonplace to argue that textual substitution within stock character memes is a form of remix it is perhaps not surprising that one of the more significant documentary projects on the topic of remix and remix culture bears the title "Everything Is A Remix." Now characterized as an ongoing video series, "Everything Is A Remix" is New York Filmmaker Kirby Ferguson's entry into the small but popular micro genre of remix and copyright focused documentaries. Ferguson begins by presenting the following definition of "remix" in a crawl reminiscent of the "Star Wars" openings: "To combine or edit existing materials to produce something new."<sup>32</sup> The potential problem with this is that it makes literally *all* acts of composition "remixes." Literally *any piece of literary composition ever* meets this definition by combining at least the existing materials of the alphabet to make something new.

To be fair Ferguson hedges his title early on. After rehearsing the ease with which contemporary digital tools facilitate cutting and pasting, Ferguson intones: "You *might* even say everything is a remix" [emphasis added]. But let's *not*. And part of the reason not to is that if everything is a remix than everyone is a remixer by default, and we lost track of the effort involved in opting in and affirmatively choosing the composing strategies that most challenge us within the expanding remix culture.

The question raised by "Everything is a Remix" is whether composers benefit from a popular understanding that *all* work is best understood in terms of its dependencies. And my answer here is a "no" within the broader context of my own body of scholarship that has made my affinity for remix genres at least implicitly clear.<sup>33</sup> What's missing in all of these permutations of Yoko Ono

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<sup>32</sup> Kirby Ferguson, "Everything is a Remix, Part 1," *Everything is a Remix* video, 7:18, September 12, 2010, <http://everythingisaremix.info/watch-the-series/>.

<sup>33</sup> Interested readers should see, especially, John Logie. "Peeling the Layers of the Onion: Authorship in Mashup and Remix Cultures," in *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, ed. Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

remixes — with the exception of “Revolution 9” — is Yoko Ono’s own direct participation. Despite being an extremely productive site for many types of remix, Ono’s own contributions tend toward mixes that are then remixed.

## Conclusion

*Remix will be there*

*And everywhere*

*Here, there and everywhere*

In the case of Yoko Ono we see academic scholarship positioning her 1960s conceptual art as remix, when in most cases it is *not*. With the notable exception of “Revolution 9,” which clearly belongs in any remix family tree attempting to address contemporary practice, the overwhelming bulk of Ono’s work sits comfortably outside the frame of remix. Her work is by turns conceptual, participatory, minimalist, feminist, and challenging, but it is not grounded in the specific practices, audio or otherwise that feed into contemporary conceptions of remix. The answer to the question: “Yoko Ono’s Instruction paintings are remix, right?” Is “not really,” because this work does not swing on the cut/copy/paste aesthetics *especially as facilitated by digital technology* that are central to contemporary remix. Yoko Ono’s vocals are central to an incredible string of dance club hits, but Ono cheerfully acknowledges her own “hands off” approach to the dance remixes that circulate under her name. Ono’s personae as celebrity and artist are routinely repurposed on YouTube and within social media, but these marginal participants in remix culture occur without the participation or (almost certainly) the awareness of Ono, and are in many cases parodic or otherwise critical of Ono. There is so much “Yoko Ono remix” material, and yet so little Yoko Ono decision-making reflected in this material, other than the choices made by Yoko Ono in the foundational tracks and images that are remixed.

Yoko Ono is remixed here, there, and everywhere, but Yoko Ono herself *does not remix* here, there, and everywhere. And this suggests both that not everyone is intentionally a remixer and not everyone needs to be. For most of her career as an artist, Ono was *not* making particular use of the cut/copy/paste aesthetics that Borschke rightly identifies as central to remix now. And this becomes strikingly clear in an Ono work whose title suggests that it might participate in these practices: “Cut Piece” from 1964. The premise is simple. Ono kneels on the floor and a pair of scissors is given to the audience members who are free to approach Ono one at a time and cut as little or as much of her clothing off of her body as they choose to cut. The audience members who cut the clothing are free to keep the pieces. The 1965 performance of “Cut Piece” at the Carnegie Recital Hall<sup>34</sup> is perhaps the best known, and most painful to watch. After a series of people snip bits of fabric, a young man approaches Ono and methodically uses the scissors to disrobe her until a female voice interrupts and says: “stop being a creep.” The initial wave of performances of “Cut Piece” are not examples of remix. They are participatory and conceptual. And they find their power in the embedded risks Ono assumed as a performer.

On the other hand, Ono’s 2003 performance of “Cut Piece” is a different matter altogether. In a 2008 article now archived at Ono’s own ImaginePeace.com website, Kevin Concannon discusses the ways in which Ono’s work has been understood as a feminist work of art only since the 1990s

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<sup>34</sup> Maysles, Albert and David Maysles, “Yoko Ono’s ‘Cut Piece,’” *YouTube*, September 15, 2015. Accessed September 11, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTGSsWVK2Eo>.

and that Ono herself did not describe “Cut Piece” in these terms and further, that the critical reception generally did not process it as such until the work was more than a quarter-century old. That said, Ono’s framing of the 2003 performance acknowledges its reception, and makes explicit that the piece is meant to be, among other things, “against sexism, and against violence”:

In September 2003, at the age of seventy, Ono performed Cut Piece in Paris “for world peace.” Thirty – nine years after her first performance of the work, she told Reuters News Agency that she did it “against ageism, against racism, against sexism, and against violence.” Although neither Ono nor her critics framed Cut Piece as a feminist work in the 1960s when she was first performing it, she has clearly subsumed the subsequent feminist interpretations of her piece into her own revised intention all these years later.<sup>35</sup>

Here Ono *is* assuming the mantle of remix artist. Though the score for “Cut Piece” has not changed, the surrounding context has. Indeed, the 2003 performance of “Cut Piece” necessarily responds to the 1965 piece, the video of which has been widely circulated ever since. The 2003 performance of “Cut Piece” invites consideration of the differences between an artist at 31 and an artist at 70, about the meaning of the act of cutting clothes from someone who was described by John Lennon as “unknown” and cutting clothes from a woman whose artistry and celebrity had been established for decades. Ono shifted the site of “Cut Piece” from an exhibit hall to a staging for the mass media. In all of these decisions, Ono is remixing “Cut Piece” in terms of time, space, and context, in pursuit of persuasive goals which are overt.



It is here, at last, that Yoko Ono asserts herself as a “remix artist,” though, remarkably, it is Ono herself who has become the “other” who has taken up “Cut Piece” and re-expressed it.

Contemporary remix offers opportunities for composers to renegotiate their relationships with authorship, ownership, and originality. That said, these relationships are varied and nuanced, even within the space of a single composer’s compositions. We can see “Yoko Ono remixes” here, there, and everywhere, but we also see an expanding range of rhetorical, cultural, and compositional positions for Yoko Ono in relation to these remixes. And this reminds us to pay close attention to the choices, overt and unspoken, that composers make when and where they participate in remix cultures.

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<sup>35</sup> Kevin Concannon, “Yoko Ono’s CUT PIECE: From Text to Performance and Back Again,” *Imagine Peace*, September, 2008, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://imaginepeace.com/archives/2680>.