



Above: Artist Yoko Ono (right) speaking about the career of the 2015 Courage Awards for the Arts honoree Jeffrey Deitch (seated) in New York on Sunday evening, Feb. 22. **Below:** Ono with Ornette Coleman, the legendary jazz saxophonist, composer and band leader, who is another one of this year's award recipients. *Photos by E.M.G.*



In New York, Artist Yoko Ono Presents 2015 Courage Awards

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NEW YORK — There was another awards ceremony in the United States last night...

At a private dinner at The Modern, a restaurant in the Museum of Modern Art's main building in Manhattan, the artist Yoko Ono Lennon presented the **2015 Courage Awards for the Arts**. First awarded in 2009, Ono's prize is among the less familiar expressions of philanthropy and cultural activism for which this internationally recognized multimedia artist, performer and peace activist is known.

Still, as Ono has said, it is an awards program whose mission and character resonate deeply with the artist herself. That's because, as she has observed, over the decades of a long, multifaceted career she has learned firsthand about struggling, perseverance and striving to remain true to one's creative vision, often in the face of harsh criticism, misunderstanding or rejection.

With such themes in mind, over the years Ono's Courage Awards have acknowledged the achievements and the stick-to-itiveness of art-makers, music-makers, creative visionaries and champions of free expression. Past recipients of the awards have included, among others, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange; the feminist artist, writer and activist, Kate Millett; composer-performer Meredith Monk; the Guerrilla Girls; composer-performers La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela; the Austrian artist Valie Export; the London-based artist Gustav Metzger, who is most often associated with "auto-destructive" art; and the 19th-century writer Émile Zola. (PEN American Center, the organization that supports writers and freedom of expression, picked up Zola's 2010 award for him in that long-deceased author's name.)

This year's Courage Award recipients included **Ornette Coleman**, the pioneering jazz saxophonist and composer; **Jeffrey Deitch**, the New York art dealer and former director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; **Toshi Ichiyanagi**, the Japanese composer (who

was Ono's first husband); and **Jonas Mekas**, the avant-garde filmmaker and a co-founder of New York's Anthology Film Archives.

Speaking to a gathering that included performance artist Laurie Anderson, artist Jeff Koons, New York art dealer Andrea Rosen, composer and WNYC-FM radio-program host David Garland ("Spinning on Air"), and various museum curators and art-world figures, Ono praised this year's Courage Award winners for their creativity and risk-taking spirit, despite the criticism most of them had encountered in the past.

"You look younger than ever before!" Ono told Coleman, with whose ensemble, in 1968, she recorded free-form compositions with wildly inventive vocals, in which the saxophonist's band mimicked her gasping, yelping, unpredictably emotive vocal acrobatics. (A sample of that collaboration can be found on Ono's first record album, *Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band*, which was issued on Apple Records in December 1970.)

Alluding to his return to New York after his recent, controversial stint as MOCA's



Left: The Japanese composer Toshi Ichianagi, a 2015 Courage Awards for the Arts honoree, sent his acceptance speech from Tokyo via pre-recorded video clip. The artist Yoko Ono's first husband, Ichianagi is known for his experimental works, which have featured a wide range of instrument configurations. *Photo by E.M.G.*

director in Los Angeles, Ono greeted Deitch with a hearty "Welcome back!" and noted, "We need your risk-taking. We need your vision." She referred to Deitch as one of the most original dealers in the art world, whose approaches to selecting new works to show and to presenting art have dramatically affected — some-time controversially — conventional ways in which contemporary art has been viewed.

In accepting his award, Deitch recalled presenting part of Ono's "En Trance/ Ex It" exhibition at his former New York gallery space in 1988, at which time he showed the artist's one hundred wooden coffins, out of which fruit trees grew in the open spaces where the faces of deceased human bodies normally are visible. That show, Deitch said, "was the most moving exhibition I ever presented" and one that took some hits from unappreciative critics. "It showed me what Yoko had been up against all those years," Deitch observed.



Far left: Ornette Coleman, one of this year's Courage Awards for the Arts honorees, and the performance artist Laurie Anderson, who received the award last year. **Left:** The art dealer and former museum director Jeffrey Deitch, Ono and, at the podium, the artist Jeff Koons, who spoke about his longtime working relationship with Deitch. *Photos by E.M.G.*

The Japan-based composer Ichiyanagi, who, like Ono, is now 82 years old, could not attend last night's awards event but he sent a videotaped thank-you message from his home. Garland described Ichiyanagi's music, which has combined Western and Eastern instrumentation or brought together a traditional orchestra with a rock band as having consistently "offered listeners new experiences."

Ono said, "Toshi, your energy goes way back to when you were at school, a student at Julliard. I was so viciously attacked in the press in Japan in 1962, and you stood up for me. You created a revolution in Japanese music, always following your creative instinct. I remember everything. Thank you for being you."

To the Lithuanian-born Mekas, Ono said, "Your courage was born with you from the beginning; it served you well when you were a teenager, coming to America. You stood firm —single-handedly —for a different kind of film, supporting the most unpopular filmmakers and opening the eyes of the world." Mekas, who came to the U.S. in 1949 and purchased his first Bolex camera two weeks after arriving in New York, replied, "I was just walking blindly through life." In fact, the film-preserving and -presenting institution he helped established has long provided a showcase for experimental films that would almost never find backers in the movie industry's commercial mainstream.

Acknowledging that her Courage Awards have existed somewhat off the mainstream media's and even the specialized art media's radar screens, Ono noted that "a fantastic spirit" has surrounded this awards program since into inception. About the personal histories of prospective winners and the decision-making process leading up to her choices of whom to honor each year, Ono noted enigmatically, "I'm actually a very nervous person, and there are so many beautiful stories I could tell you." She said no more, leaving her guests to ponder the achievements and the significance of the recipients she had chosen for this year's awards — and exactly what it means to be courageous in the making and presenting of one's art. •