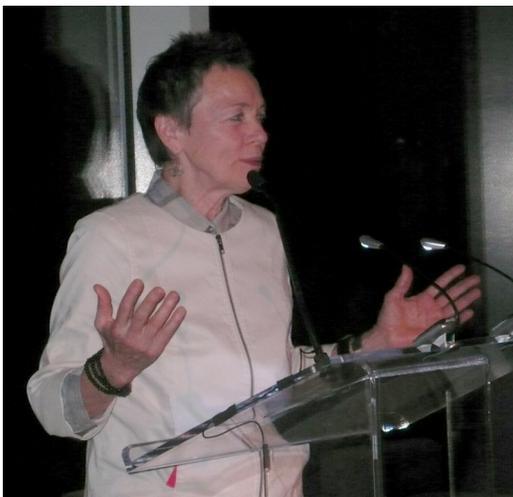




**Top:** Artist Yoko Ono presiding at the podium at the presentation of the 2014 Courage Awards for the Arts in New York this past Sunday, Feb. 24, 2014. **Above:** Ono's white top hat. **Below:** Performance artist Laurie Anderson, one of this year's laureates, at the awards ceremony. *Photos by E.M.G.*



## In New York, Artist Yoko Ono Presents 2014 Courage Awards

By Edward M. Gómez [www.edwardmgomez.com](http://www.edwardmgomez.com)

NEW YORK — First presented in 2009, Yoko Ono's Courage Awards for the Arts are among the less well-known expressions of philanthropy and cultural activism for which the internationally famous multimedia artist, performer and peace activist has been recognized. Still, as Ono has said, it is an awards program whose mission and character resonate deeply with the artist herself. That's because, Ono has observed, over the decades she has learned a thing or two about perseverance, struggle 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, Ono's Courage Awards acknowledge the achievements and the stick-to-itiveness of art-makers, music-makers, creative visionaries and determined champions of free expression, that indispensable, basic human right that allows creativity to flow. 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; and the 19th-century writer Émile Zola. (In fact, 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.) Each award consists of a framed certificate and a check in the amount of \$25,000.00.

"I feel very honored that I can do this," Ono said this past Sunday night, February 23, at a private dinner at The Modern, a ground-floor restaurant at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, where the awards ceremony took place.

Speaking to a gathering of guests that included Patti Smith, composer and WNYC-FM radio-program host David Garland ("Spinning on Air"), artist and Franklin Furnace Archive founder Martha Wilson (a 2012 Courage Award laureate), museum curators and other art-world figures, Ono presented the 2014 Courage Awards for the Arts to performance artist-musician Laurie Anderson; the Vienna-based, Austrian artist Valie Export; the British singer-actress Marianne Faithfull; and the London-based artist Gustav Metzger, who is most often associated with "auto-destructive" art.

In 1966, Metzger led a committee that organized the Destruction in Art Symposium, a program of happenings that took place in London in the autumn of that year. Ono took part in that festival of

avant-garde events. Last year, when Ono served as curator of Meltdown, the annual music-and-art festival at London's Southbank Centre, she invited Metzger to create an installation work there.

Looking back on Anderson's career, Ono remarked, "With Laurie, the first thing you notice is that she is such a warm person." Ono suggested that a soft-spoken, never overtly angry, measured tone that has characterized Anderson's work ("She has never been upset with us") has helped boost the impact of its observations and messages.

Inspired in part by the performance works of the Viennese Actionists of the 1960s, in the later years of that decade Valie Export radically challenged complacent, post-World War II attitudes in Austria through such performances of her own as "Tap and Touch Cinema," in which she wore a box around her chest with a curtain in front; passers-by were invited to reach through the box's theater-like front to touch her naked breasts. In "Action Pants: Genital Panic" (1968), Export walked into an art-house cinema wearing crotchless trousers. Later she was photographed in that outfit, wielding a machine gun, in an indelible, symbolic image of a subverted sexual power play.

"You have always risen above degradation as a strong woman; thank you for your great courage, Valie," Ono said. Stuart Comer, the chief curator in the Museum of Modern Art's media and performance art department, introduced Export by noting that the artist's works "still shock and make us think about the status of women in society." In accepting her award, Export emphasized that, for her, it will symbolize an enduring sense of "connection between [our] two continents," a relationship she said she finds especially meaningful because she first showed her earliest films in New York decades ago.

Neither Marianne Faithfull nor Gustav Metzger could travel to New York to receive their awards in person. Chrissie Iles, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, accepted Faithfull's award on the singer's behalf. Iles recalled that "Marianne emerged in London at the same time Yoko did." (Faithfull's first hit record, "At Tears Go By," was released in 1964; two years later, Ono had a solo show at London's Indica Gallery, which was co-owned by Faithfull's then-husband, John Dunbar; it was there that the Japanese artist would first meet John Lennon.) Iles added, "Marianne's courage was tested during those years, as she became a kind of lightning rod for [the conventions] she and her peers were overturning."

Kerry Brougher, the interim director and chief curator of the Smithsonian Institution's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., accepted Metzger's award for the absent artist. Through May 26, the Hirshhorn is presenting "Damage Control: Art and Destruction Since 1950," an exhibition featuring films of Metzger's "paintings" made with hydrochloric acid and of Ono's 1965 performance in New York of her "Cut Piece," in which audience members used scissors to snip away at the clothes she was wearing while seated, silent and still, on Carnegie Recital Hall's stage.

In accepting Metzger's award, Brougher observed, "I echo what Yoko just said: Read about Gustav's career. Find out about him. [...] He has been admired by other artists for his art of destruction and creation; his parents perished in a concentration camp, but Gustav went on to [show] that, in a society bent on destruction, artistic creation could come out of destruction." Today, Brougher suggested, Metzger's artistic legacy may be found reflected in the question, "Will we have the courage to stand firm against the destructive mechanisms of our own time?"

Ending the awards ceremony, Ono noted that, when she started handing out her special prize a few years ago, she recognized that courage "is something not only soldiers need to have." Nodding admiringly at the honorees and their representatives who had gathered around her, she added, "Artists need courage — and many of them have it, too."