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Yo, Make Deborah Kass's Public Sculpture in Brooklyn Permanent!

Benjamin Sutton | February 25, 2016



Deborah Kass, "OY/YO" (2015) in Brooklyn Bridge Park (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

When I first saw it in November, I was immediately inclined to bemoan the fact that Deborah Kass's canary yellow public sculpture "OY/YO," installed on the Brooklyn waterfront in Dumbo, will not be there permanently. I'm apparently not alone in feeling this way, as someone recently launched a petition calling on New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio to make it permanent. But perhaps its temporary nature is for the best. Perhaps it's too of the moment, its alternate readings articulating all too perfectly the city's current pecking order of interborough coolness — "Yo, welcome to Brooklyn!" and "Oy, you're not really thinking of going into Manhattan, are you?" Maybe it's too perfect a prop for selfies, punctuating postcard views of Lower Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge, or glowing against the manicured grittiness of Dumbo's cobblestone canyons.

The sculpture, which was commissioned by local real estate empire Two Trees and is scheduled to be in Brooklyn Bridge Park through August, is an endearingly public iteration of Kass's career-long project to inject some real world criticality and humor into the macho and self-serious Modern art canon. "OY/YO" has its origins in a diptych of yellow-on-blue paintings, from 2009 and 2010, riffing on Ed Ruscha's iconic canvas "OOF" (1962/63). As with so much of Kass's work, the pleasure to be taken from "OY" and "YO" comes both from their fidelity to the original and their clever tweaking of its meaning. Where "OOF" suggests fatigue and abdication, Kass's diptych speaks of annoyance, exclamation, and, above all, engagement.



Deborah Kass, "OY/YO" (2015) in Brooklyn Bridge Park Deborah Kass, "OY/YO" (2015) in Brooklyn Bridge Park

In its eight-foot-tall, five-foot-deep, and 17-foot-wide aluminum iteration, "OY/YO" also seems (intentionally or not) to address another iconic piece of text-y Pop art: Robert Indiana's "LOVE" (1970). Where that cheery sculpture now seems sentimental and schmaltzy, there's a jaded, "I've seen it all" tone to the "OY" side of Kass's sculpture, complimented nicely by the flip side's jubilant and assertive "YO." Indiana is forever doomed to cloying earnestness, but Kass can have it both ways.

Like the version of "LOVE" on Sixth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, "OY/YO" has a magnetic power over tourists. It also conveniently offers a script to locals greeting said tourists: the welcoming "yo!" or the irritated "oy!" It stands as a glowing beacon on its little hill, irrevocably drawing passersby,

many of whom sit on it or pose with their heads sticking through the hole in the O, despite the “No Climbing” signs; others just use it as a tripod for their art-free Manhattan skyline shots. On two occasions when I’ve visited, an informal line has developed, with people waiting their turn to pose with it, either opting for the “YO” reading and Brooklyn backdrop or “OY” against Lower Manhattan. This duality of meanings may be the sculpture’s greatest strength. Its ability to suggest either jubilation or frustration at any moment matches our culture’s bipolar tendency to alternate constantly between precious optimism (à la Indiana’s “LOVE”) and glum defeatism (as in Ruscha’s “OOF”). The sculpture’s current siting cleverly compliments and amplifies these readings, and I doubt any other future location will ever offer so many interpretations. Oy, I guess I’ll sign that petition after all.



Detail of Deborah Kass’s “OY/YO” (2015) with the top of One World Trade Center in the distance

Deborah Kass’s sculpture “OY/YO” is located in Brooklyn Bridge Park (Dumbo, Brooklyn), near the intersection of Plymouth and Washington Streets, through August.