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DATEBOOK

ART & EXHIBITS

'YO': Stanford has a new, bright-yellow social media magnet

Sam Whiting | January 13, 2020

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Gavin Gong, 4 (left) poses for a photo on Deborah Kass' "Oy/Yo" sculpture outside the Cantor Arts Center in Palo Alto.

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, The Chronicle

Sartorial planning got Alexis Murphy to Cantor Arts Center wearing her yellow crewneck sweater. She'd come to the free museum at Stanford University to snap a photo to post on Instagram, one of her peeking through the hollow center of a huge, new sculpture at the building's entrance, and wanted to make sure she matched it.

Her daughter, Carolyn, 20, was brought along to take the picture alongside the piece, which is simply the letters "Y" and "O" – a yellow "YO," or "OY," depending on your perspective – standing on a platform. Once their image was posted online, they figured they might as well go inside the museum, which meant Cantor director Susan Dackerman's new audience engagement tool was working.

"It is intended to beckon," Dackerman says, standing at the entry plaza in a small crowd, "to say, 'Yo students, yo Stanford, yo Palo Alto, yo San Francisco, yo Bay Area, come see what we're doing at the Cantor.' "

"OY/YO" by Deborah Kass is the first piece commissioned for the museum's permanent collection under the tenure of **Dackerman, who was hired three years ago**. She'd seen "OY/YO" in Brooklyn Bridge Park, and after she got the Cantor job she tracked down the Brooklyn artist to create one. Donors to the Cantor agreed to pay for it.

"The inspiration came from the Ed Ruscha painting 'OOF,' " says Kass, by phone from New York. She'd created her own painting with the word "OY" and saw its reflection in a mirror, spelling "YO." She then turned the painting into a sculpture so it could be seen from both sides.

"Sometimes you get really lucky and art just makes itself," says Kass, who is 67 and says she has been waiting for this kind of magic all her life.



Alice Both, 6, jumps up as her father (not pictured) takes her photograph next to the “Oy/Yo” sculpture outside the Cantor Arts Center.

Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, The Chronicle

The sculpture is built of aluminum like a car body, waxed, clear-coated and painted Lamborghini yellow. It is 15 feet wide and 9 feet tall atop a concrete plinth and is meant to be permanent. It arrived Dec. 20, during the quiet of Christmas break. When students returned for winter quarter, there stood the greeter and there stood Dackerman, doing field research. A student bicycling to class glanced over and called out “Yo” in passing. He did not stop or even slow down, but it was a start.

“It allows us to think about the use of language in all kinds of ways,” Dackerman says. “‘Oy’ as an expression of resignation. ‘Yo’ as a greeting.”

The Cantor’s 19th century neoclassical architecture, decorated with statues of ancient Greeks and Venetian glass mosaics, has always been a barrier to entry. Even Alexander

Nemerov has found the entryway slightly intimidating, and he is the chair of the department of art and art history at Stanford. Nemerov walks to work and likes to approach from the east, on Campus Drive, to spot the “O” from afar and watch it take shape.

“I see this bright-yellow charismatic object, and I’m able to engage with it from an angle,” he says, also in passing. “It makes the museum seem less austere and forbidding for the students.”

By car, the approach is equally dramatic. When you turn right from Palm Drive onto Museum Way, the double yellow line in the roadway splits the two letters of “OY/YO” down the middle.



People stand on the steps of the Cantor Arts Center as they are seen through Deborah Kass’ “Oy/Yo” sculpture.

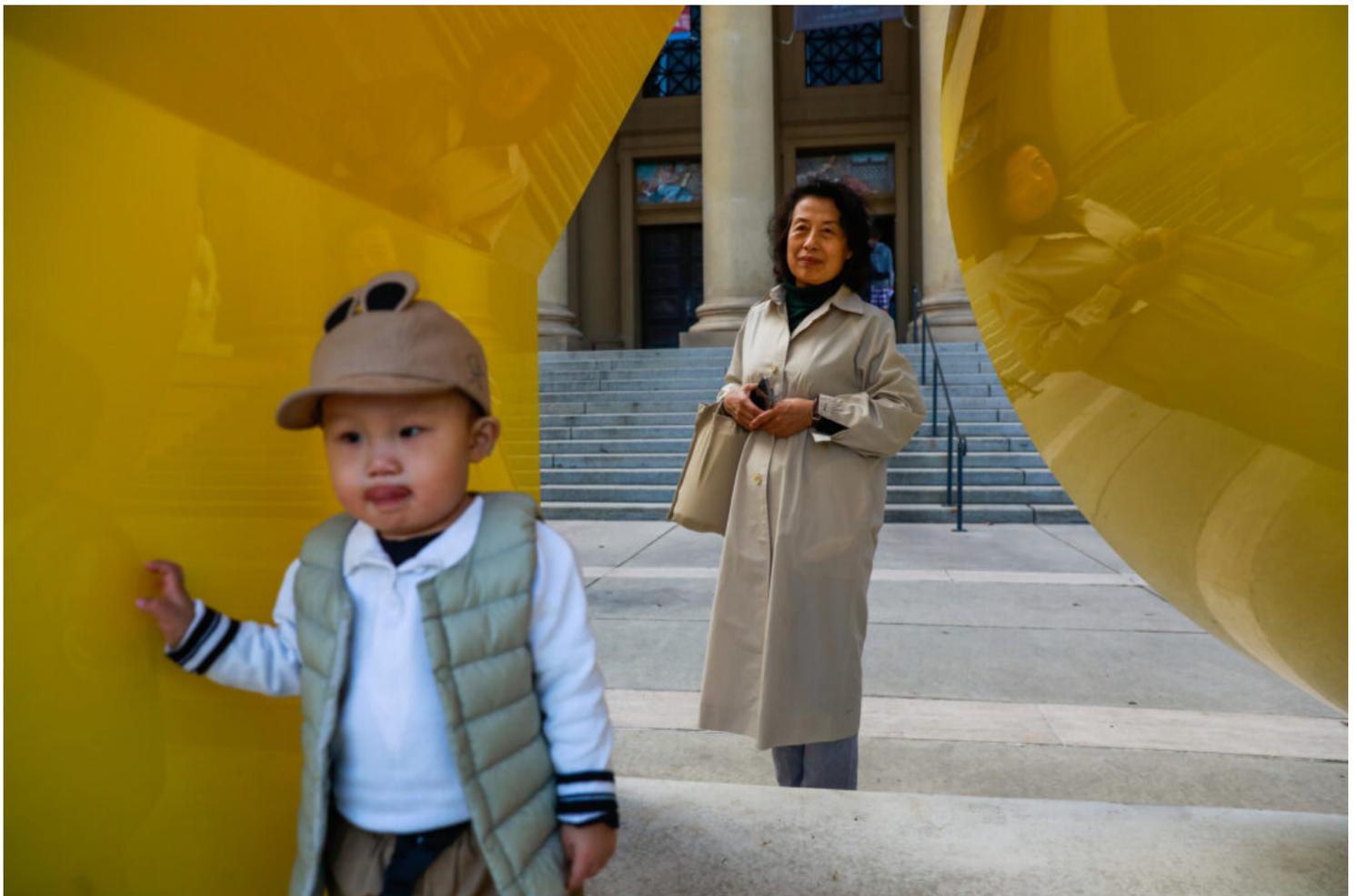
Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, The Chronicle

Visitors who park in the main lot and take the most direct route to the front door run directly into the sculpture. Almost everybody stops at least long enough to read the sign that asks people not to climb on it. The temptation is to climb up on the stand and poke your head through the ‘O’ as if you are squeezing through jail bars.

“You cannot keep people off of it,” says Kass, whose earlier piece is now permanently installed in front of the Brooklyn Museum. Search out #oyyo on Instagram and you will see “people on top of it and dogs inside of it,” says Kass as she scrolls through images while walking down a Manhattan street. “People do yoga on it. J.Lo and A-Rod did a magazine shoot in front of it.”

The Stanford version is not yet a social media sensation, but when Murphy showed up in her yellow sweater, it evoked Christo’s “The Gates,” which had people coming to New York to walk around Central Park in garish orange to match the fabric of the installation.

“I think it is cool and the color is catching,” says Taninnan Thiptanakit, a visitor from Bangkok who saw “OY/YO” on social media and tracked it to the source.

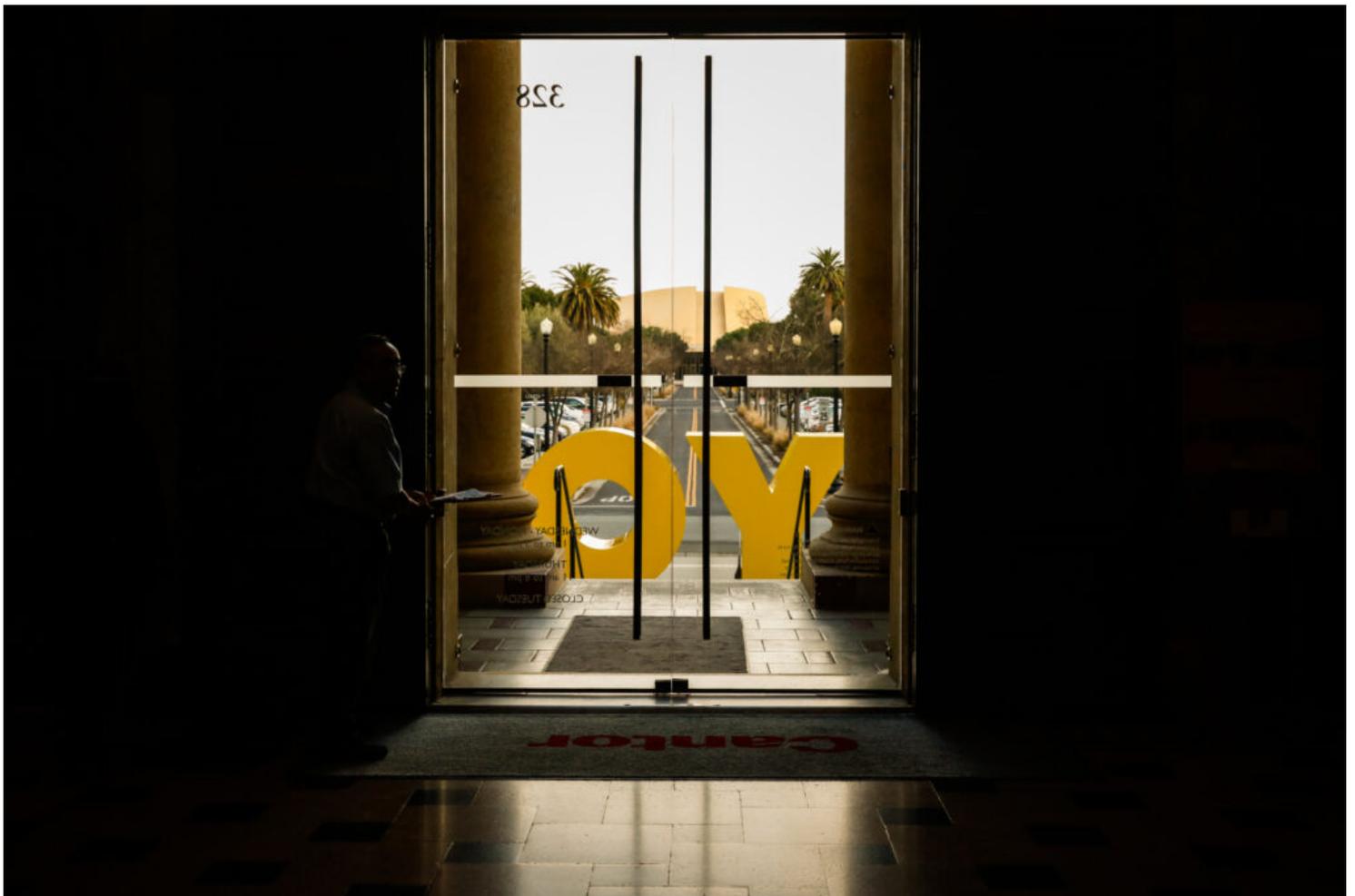


A woman cares for her grandson who plays on Deborah Kass’ “Oy/Yo” sculpture.
Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, The Chronicle

A cluster of iPhoneers turned out to be volunteer guides from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. They were here to see one of the exhibitions inside but were loitering around out front.

“I’m seeing it as a bright greeting,” says Vivienne Leibowich, who organized the trip. “It pops out and adds color to the traditional entryway.”

Stanford employee Julie Cain saw a photo of “OY/YO” and thought it out of place and overpowering. So she came to take a look expecting not to like it any better in person. The sculpture proved her first opinion wrong. “I like the irreverence, and I love the screaming zonker yellow color,” she says after standing up against the museum wall and studying it from afar for a good 10 minutes.



The “Oy/Yo” sculpture is seen from inside the Cantor Arts Center.
Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, The Chronicle

Donna Oehlberg brought her preschool grandson Wyatt Oehlberg, whose natural inclination was to climb into the O. He had to be restrained. "I think it's fun," said Donna. "It's bright and it's cheery and you can see that kids like it. Now where did he go?"

She glanced around and Wyatt was making his way up the grand staircase to the museum entrance. A new generation had found the Cantor.

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