

Expanded Vocabulary: Revisiting Deborah Kass' Studio

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Anyone who has curated an art exhibition on a shoestring budget knows to expect the 11th hour scramble. When logistical issues related to my recent show, *Social Minimalism* (2025), brought me to the Brooklyn studio of my favorite painter, I found myself in a full-circle moment as I smashed the buzzer beside a set of handwritten names: CRONIN/KASS. I had been to the studio [Deborah Kass](#) shares with her wife, the artist Patricia Cronin, once before, 20 years ago, when I interviewed Kass as background for a graduate paper I wrote on her *Warhol Project* (1992-2000). This visit followed the publication of my article, [“Inside and Outside of Queer: Deborah Kass’s Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times.”](#) in which I argue that Kass’ series spanning the first decade of the 21st century addresses the underrepresentation of women in queer art history. Upon entering the space, I was hit with the same mix of urgency and regret I had when I sent that article off to the publisher. Because, there they were, the works I couldn’t include in the essay, many of them anyway, hanging on the walls of the studio.

The scene had changed since my last visit, but much remains the same about the societal and institutional frameworks around which my discussions with Kass have long centered. As we sat around the same Eero Saarinen table where I interviewed her so many years before, our conversation returned to many of the topics animating Kass’ prolific output over the last three decades: the exclusion of women from the art world and art history, Jewish identity, queer voice, lesbian subjectivity, and enduring love of postwar American art. As we spoke, I began mapping connections between our discussion, my collection of unfinished writings on Kass’ art, and the stunning works surrounding us.

I had some idea of what to expect before my arrival. A photograph of Kass and Titus Kaphar seated in front of *Everybody* (2019), a large painting/sculpture installation that currently hangs in Kass’ studio, illustrates the artists’ 2025 conversation in [Interview magazine](#). That conversation centered around Kass’ Art History paintings, most of which appeared in the impressive retrospective dedicated to the series that opened the month prior, at Salon 94. Not addressed by either artist, *Everybody* forms a kind of ghost note in the interview, silently elaborating some of the themes Kass and Kaphar discuss, not least the influence of critical race studies on Kass’ practice.

Like the *Feel Good...* paintings, Kass' *No Kidding* (2013-ongoing) works combine recognizable aesthetics from the postwar era with verbal elements recalling 20th century music. But rather than taking their sonic cues from the great American songbook, as did most of the *Feel Good...* paintings, many of the *No Kidding* works look to the popular airwaves and New York club scene of the last quarter of the 20th century for their sources. The title of the *No Kidding* series is a nod to Carrie Mae Weems' *Ain't Joking* series (1987-88), and, like Weems' photographs, several of these paintings and assemblages address issues of race in American society and visual culture.



Deborah Kass, "Everybody," 2019, acrylic and neon on canvas, 100 x 108 inches. © 2026 Deborah Kass / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Everybody extends the critical historiographic approach of the *Feel Good...* series and, echoing the expression of another *No Kidding* work, *Don't Stop* (2019), responds to queer art history's racial and gender diversification during the 2010s with a demand for continued expansion. The installation, which pairs the iconic chorus sung by Martha Wash in the Black Box hit *Everybody Everybody* (1990) with panels recalling the Ellsworth Kelly monochromes housed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., carries forward Kass' approach of quoting paintings and sculptures as a way of calling to mind the writings that have memorably addressed them. Indeed, Kass' use of Kelly's motifs — empty panels — throughout much of the *No Kidding* series alludes to those (and all) paintings' inevitable transformation into containers of their own discursivization. *Everybody*, thus, stages a blending of voices, with the lyrical refrain sounding over the queer discursivity recently trained on Kelly's art: Wash's Black and female voice responds to queer art history, asserting this field will only achieve the institutional and societal disruption conveyed by its name upon its inclusion of all marginalized people — *everybody*.



"Before and Happily Ever After," 1991, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. © 2026 Deborah Kass / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Funny thing about Kass' art: I often think I have encountered one of her paintings or sculptures in person, only to remember it's the work of the artist Kass has appropriated that I've seen. This happens almost every time I recall Kass' *Before and Happily Ever After* (1991), a montage painting that stacks a faithful reproduction of Warhol's massively scaled copy of a "nose job" advertisement over the climactic moment of Disney's *Cinderella* (1950), when the Prince's steward fits the protagonist with the glass slipper. *Before and Happily Ever After* alludes to the popularity of the "nose job" among Jewish women of the postwar period seeking to fit American beauty standards.* But more than addressing the assimilationist impulse of an earlier generation of Jewish Americans, Kass' combination of *Before and After* with this reference to a heterosexual pairing also decodes Warhol's allusion by ethnocultural analogy to the pre-Stonewall queer survival strategy of "passing."²²



Deborah Kass, "After Louise Nevelson," 2020, neon, 29 1/4 x 27 inches. © 2026 Deborah Kass / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The same authorial confusion momentarily overtook me as Kass gestured to a neon light sculpture hanging beside *Everybody* in the studio. *After Louise Nevelson* (2020) reproduces the format and medium of Bruce Nauman's *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967) but replaces the phrase of the original with a statement attributed to the postwar sculptor Louise Nevelson: "Anger? I'd be dead without my anger." Nauman's sculpture, which hung in the window of his studio in the late 1960s, positions "the artist" within the larger complex of cultural and intellectual producers whose "truths" established the terms of modern life. The spiral bounding the text in Nauman's sculpture recalls the abstract expressionist generation's promotion of Jungian archetypes, among other referential systems, in their works as a basis for achieving universal language and conveying, however abstractly, the human experience. But Nauman's spiral also at once symbolizes and simulates the disorienting confrontation with what philosophers call "the void," reminding us that modern knowledge systems are constructions devised to conceal the true absence of meaning.

Kass' sculpture affirms Nauman's analysis of modern art and epistemology, but it also elaborates, processing these ideas through a feminist lens. For however "constructed" our reality, the construction carries very real and differential effects for men and women, and that inequality starts with the matter of whose intellectual and artistic productions constitute: whether it is modernist painting or the postmodernism that deconstructs it, male authorship by and large remains the precondition for art's institutional positioning as source of knowledge.

After Louise Nevelson belongs to a group of works spanning Kass' most recent series celebrating women named Louise who fought for their place in the canon. Another spin on Nauman's motif features a modified statement from Louise Bourgeois: "A WOMAN HAS NO PLACE IN THE ART WORLD UNLESS SHE PROVES OVER AND OVER AGAIN SHE WON'T BE ELIMINATED." In both works, Kass' presentation of the spiral evokes at once the dizzying rage into which so much of her production taps as motivation for resisting women's erasure and the repetition, the necessary over and over of that career-defining practice.



Deborah Kass, “OY,” 2020, color silkscreen and flocking on rising 2 ply museum board, 32 x 30 inches. © 2026 Deborah Kass / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Hanging above us as we spoke in the studio was a flocked silkscreen print of what is today Kass’ most celebrated motif, which replaces Ed Ruscha’s “OOF” with the Yiddish expression, “OY.” This substitution, in the first place, extends a critical thread of the earlier *Warhol Project*, where, as Kass explains in an interview with Irving Sandler, her depiction of Barbra Streisand and Sandy Koufax in Warhol’s signature style addresses the absence of Jewishness in the multicultural art discourse of the end of the 20th century.

But the reference to Jewish cultural identity in *OY* (2020) also at once confirms and complicates the gender deconstruction of Ruscha's original. Ruscha's *OOF* (1962) combines a partial quotation of a Jasper Johns target painting (the "O" recalls the central oculus and first inner ring of the target) with the onomatopoeia enunciating the gut punch in postwar America comics. Combining these motifs, the painting expands upon Johns' satire of "action painting" with his targets, suggesting the aggression New York School artists brought to their works was a masculine ideal gleaned from popular sources and not the expression of an inner essence.***

As much as Kass' print recalls the Ruscha, its floating forms on an abstract field also echoes the mature work of Mark Rothko, the Jewish abstract expressionist whose serene and spiritual paintings formed a counterpoint to the slash-and-splash style of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Alluding, thus, to the gentle, empathetic model of manhood promoted in Jewish communities, *OY* nuances *OOF*'s assertion of gender's cultural basis by positing masculinity's varied composition across different cultural contexts.



Deborah Kass, "Save the Country Now," 2025, 15 layer screen print on Coventry rag paper, 36 x 28 inches. © 2026 Deborah Kass / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Finally, there is the work that brought me to Kass' studio, *Save the Country Now* (2025). This print, a 15-layer silkscreen sumptuously printed in matte and gloss on Coventry rag paper, superimposes the rectilinear format of Frank Stella's concentric square paintings over a vortex of orthogonal lines connecting the outer edges of the composition to a vanishing point at center. Combining these formal and spatial motifs, the print recalls the art critic, Rosalind Krauss' suggestion in "A View of Modernism" (1972) that if Stella's works depict anything, it is the teleological view of history that modernist criticism brings to them. Likening the human eye's reception to linear perspective to the popular conception of the past as a sequence of stages, Krauss saw in the illusionistic depth of Stella's concentric squares a reflection of modernist criticism's view that 1960s painting is the outcome and vessel of the entire history of that art's incremental development.****

Discernible through the mesh of competing motifs in Kass' print is a phrase: "SAVE THE COUNTRY NOW." Taken from Laura Nyro's 1968 song of the same name, the phrase also recalls the recurring public rhetoric of our current political moment. In this light, the print expands upon the postmodernist critique it cites to warn that history is not a linear development and the passage of time does not on its own ensure continued social progress. Finally, then, the print's expression takes on a third value as a call to viewers to resist the "rolling back" of the gains of the social movements of the 1960s and beyond that suddenly defines our time.*****

*See Michael Plante, "Screened Identities, Multiple Repetitions and Missed Kisses: Deborah Kass's Warhol Project," in *Deborah Kass: The Warhol Project*, exh. cat., Plante, ed. (Newcomb Art Gallery, Woldenberg Art Center of Tulane University; New York: DAP, 1999) 44-45; Irving Sandler, "Deborah Kass: Do Something Special," in *Deborah Kass and Lisa Liebman, Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After*, exh. cat. (New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 2012) 17-18.

**See Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 235.

***See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4. (Dec., 1988) 521.

****Rosalind Krauss, "A View of Modernism" *Artforum*, Vol 11, No.1 (September 1972) 50; a portion of this discussion of *Save the Country Now* appears in my article on Kass' *Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times*, where I address another work from the series featuring similar motifs. See Theo. Triandos, "Inside and Outside of 'Queer': Deborah Kass's *Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times*" *Woman's Art Journal* (Spring/Summer 2024) 39.

*****This account of *Save the Country Now* appears in Triandos, *Social Minimalism* exh. essay (2025).

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