

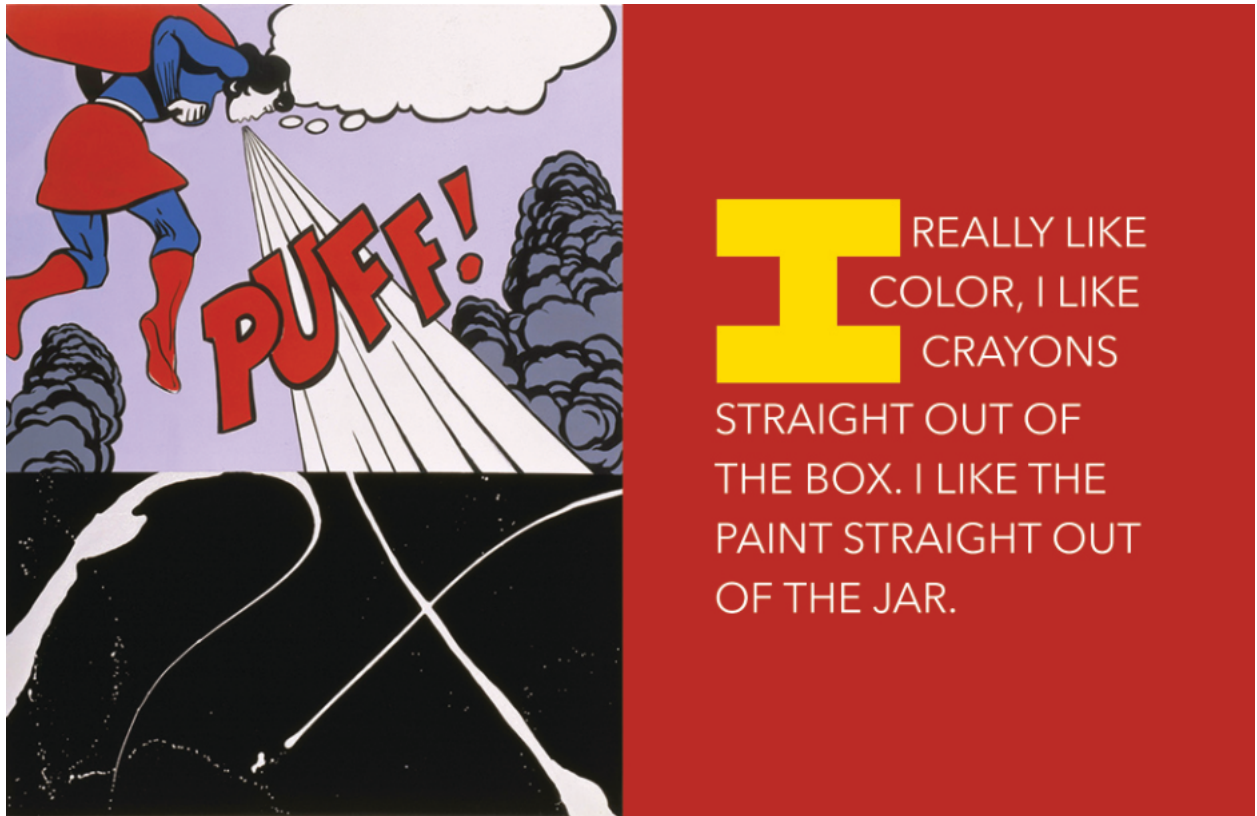
Lesbian Culture Club

Deborah Kass On Meaning, Identification, and the Seduction of Color.



Written by Catie Keck

Deborah Kass is a prolific, Brooklyn-based artist whose work reimagines the visual languages of postwar American art through a queer feminist lens, blending appropriation, pop culture, politics, and autobiography to examine who gets seen, celebrated, and remembered. She speaks in systems political, aesthetic, and historical, each braiding into the next to create art that's visually striking and ideologically subversive.



Over the course of an hourlong conversation with Lesbian Culture Club, what begins as an interview about queer representation and artistic practice quickly expands into something much broader: a reading of the art world as market and ideology as something that is under increasing pressure from politics, aging institutions, and exhausted infrastructures.

Kass has long been known for work that moves between community and self, reworking the visual languages of artists like Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns while engaging a broader lineage that includes Cindy Sherman, Louise Bourgeois, and Barbara Kruger. Her work has been exhibited internationally and shown in major institutions across the United States, including some of the country's most prominent museums. In speaking with her today, what's most present isn't just citation or critique, but urgency. She's thinking less about lineage than rupture, meaning what happens when established frameworks no longer hold and the cultural conversation has shifted elsewhere.



Still, the interview resists becoming a story about collapse. Even within a conversation about cultural and political fracture, she repeatedly describes the experience of being moved by diverse art forms, most notably music and performance. She describes Bruce Springsteen as “profound art,” capable of producing a level of collective identification and emotional intensity she rarely encounters in visual art—a reminder that shared experience can still generate coherence.

Across our conversation, Kass returns to questions of how meaning is made through identification, shared experience, and the seduction of color and form. She speaks with intense attention to making and the necessity that work “looks good” before it can enchant or provoke viewers with complex ideas.



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Making, Color, and Aesthetic Joy

Amid her broader critique of cultural and political instability, Kass revisits repeatedly the physical pleasure of making. Even as she describes the art world in terms of collapse and retrenchment, she insists on the importance of sensorial engagement. "I really like color," she says simply. "I like crayons straight out of the box. I like the paint straight out of the jar."

For Kass, the act of making is not primarily conceptual but rather begins with attraction, surface, and enticement. "It's important for me that it looks good," she says. This is not a superficial concern in her framing, but a structural one. The visual appeal of the work becomes the entry point for everything else. "That's the seduction," she says. "That's how you get someone to the meaning."



This emphasis on pleasure is not separate from her political thinking. Even as she describes feeling “doom and gloom,” she continues to produce large-scale works that engage with democracy, optimism, and collective response. She references pieces she made during the Biden era that initially felt “optimistic,” tied to moments when political outcomes still felt open or uncertain.

What emerges is a practice that holds contradiction without resolving it. The work must be visually compelling even when its content is structurally critical. It must be alluring in order to communicate. In Kass's framing, aesthetic pleasure is strategy. The viewer is drawn in by color and form before encountering the political or conceptual weight beneath it.

Art, Identification, and Collective Experience

One of the most unexpected turns in Kass's reflections on art comes through Bruce Springsteen, whom she describes as producing a form of emotional intensity she rarely finds in visual art. We were discussing her current sources of inspiration. Of seeing Springsteen live recently, she says, "I'm still vibrating." What struck her was not only his performance but his control of a vast audience of nearly 20,000 people "who know every word."



For Kass, Springsteen becomes a model of what she calls "identification, not identity." Identification, she argues, is engaged. It's something people do in real time when they see themselves reflected in a shared experience. "When you identify with something, it's very active. It's a verb, it's not a noun."

Springsteen's concerts, she suggests, operate almost like ritual. "It is church," she says. The intensity comes not only from his performance but from the shared recognition between audience members. "People identify with Bruce," she says, "because they see themselves in all those stories he tells."

She connects this directly to her own work, particularly the OY/YO series, which she describes as functioning similarly. Viewers saw themselves in that work, she says, creating an experience that was not passive but participatory. In both cases, meaning was collectively produced rather than individually delivered.

This leads her back to a broader question about visual art and whether it can generate the same level of collective emotional convergence. She is uncertain. "Is there a visual art that comes close?" she asks. The answer, for her, is rare.



On Community and Aging

Kass's reflections on community are grounded less in abstraction than in long-term connection. "I wish I had one," she says, drawing a distinction between the art world as an industry and what she understands as something more lived and personal. "That's an art market," she says of the wider art community, "and it's all the other things that means."

Still, what she describes is not absence so much as a sustained web of relationships held together over time through regular contact, shared history, and care. Many are friendships that stretch back to early adulthood, and in some cases, childhood. Her wife, artist Patricia Cronin, is part of this same long arc of shared practice and sustained conversation, where artistic life and personal life remain closely intertwined (as in Cronin's Memorial to a Marriage, the marble tomb sculpture depicting the two of them). Community, in this sense, becomes something practiced rather than declared. It shows up in check-ins, conversations, and the ongoing maintenance of connection.

Even the realities of aging appear here as part of that continuity. Kass speaks about friends navigating illness and later life, but also about the ways people continue to show up for one another through it all. An 86-year-old friend who "swims an hour and a half a day" tells her, "This is the first time I've ever felt old," a line Kass meets with recognition shaped by her own long perspective on time and endurance.

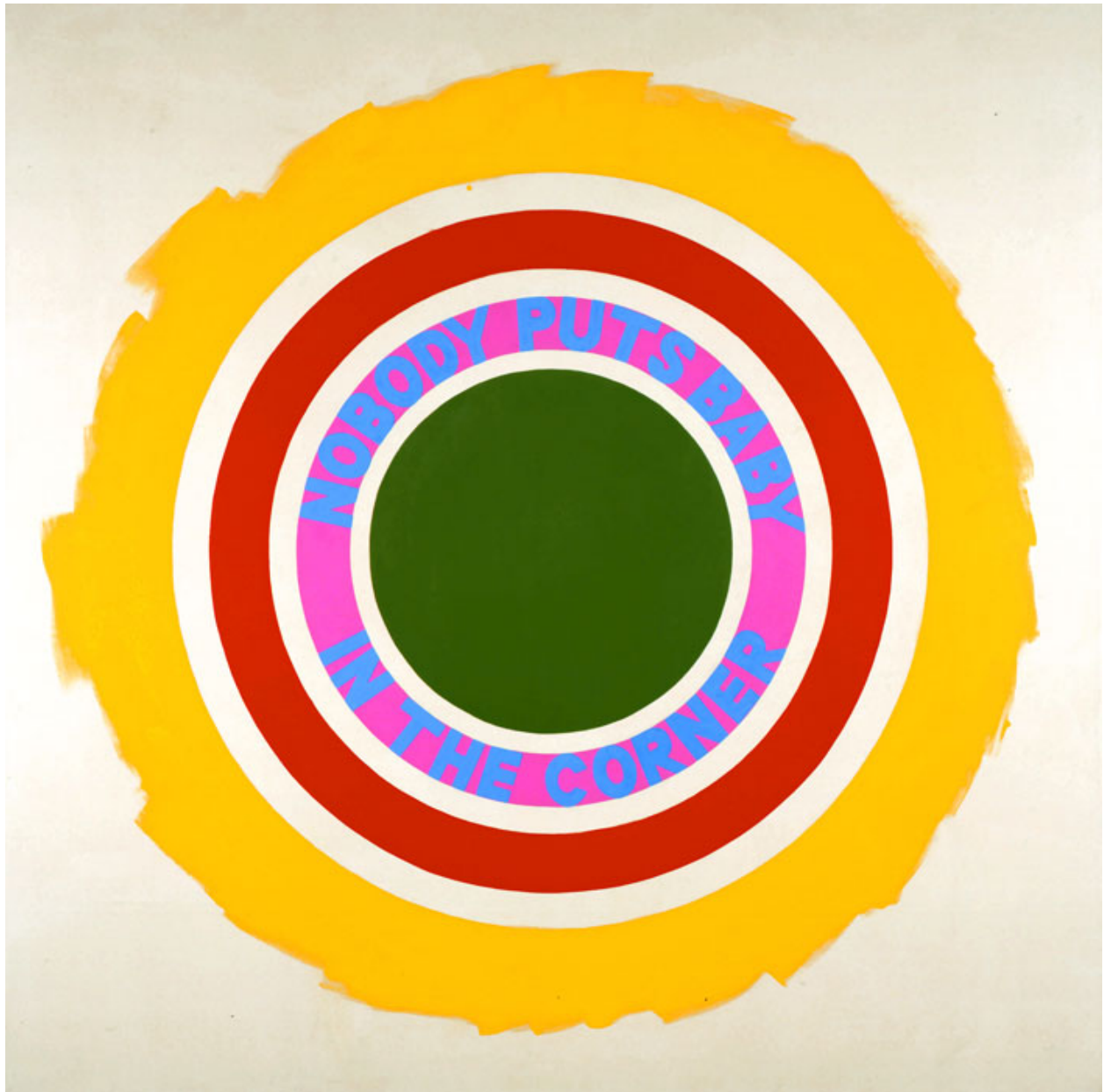
Community, here, is a network built over decades, held together not by institutions but by loyalty, humor, and routine care. "We have a list of people to check on regularly," she says. It's not an abstract ideal but an ongoing practice.

Engagement as a Way of Life

Underlying Kass's worldview is a language of survival, but also of persistence. "What's hardwired is survival," she says, describing an instinct shaped by history, memory, and attention to continuity. Joy, she notes, is not her baseline orientation, even if her work often reads as visually joyful. "Joy is not hardwired into me in any way, shape, or form."

She connects this instinct to inherited histories of displacement and vigilance. As a Jewish woman, she describes a generational awareness of threat that informs how she reads the present, recalling childhood fears of invasion and instability.

At the same time, this sense of precarity exists alongside ongoing participation in cultural and political life. Kass speaks about a world that feels unstable but also about continued engagement within it by making work, responding to political conditions, and staying active in the systems she critiques. "I'll do anything anyone asks me to do, politically," she says, describing a practice that remains responsive even under strain.



In this sense, activism becomes less a singular gesture than a sustained mode of attention. It's a way of moving through systems while still insisting on participation in them. Even when skeptical about impact, she continues to work, to respond, and to make. It's a practice that persists not because conditions are resolved, but because engagement itself continues.

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