

OY/YO: How Deborah Kass Turned Two Letters Into a Cultural Monument

Shannon Steven | July 19, 2026

This summer, I'm trying something a little different.

Every week, I'll share one artwork by one artist that has stayed with me. Sometimes it made me laugh or feel something indescribable. Sometimes it challenged what I believed. Sometimes I simply couldn't stop thinking about it.

These aren't necessarily the "greatest" works of art. They're the ones that sparked wonder for me.

I hope these stories help you discover a few artworks that stay with you, too.

See

Deborah Kass | OY/YO, 2015 | Painted Aluminum



8-foot tall, 16-foot wide, and 5-foot deep "Lamborghini yellow"

“I created *OY/YO* thinking about the American promise of equality and fairness and our responsibilities to make the country a better place for all,” says Kass. “With hate and division now on the rise, it is urgent to see our commonalities, what we share, and what brings us together.” – Deborah Kass



The Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History displays Brooklyn-based artist Deborah Kass’ monumental “OY/YO” sculpture in Historic Philadelphia. The bright yellow aluminum statue is creative wordplay using just two letters with several meanings. One side says “YO,” referencing the attention-getting phrase used throughout Philly, as well as “I” in Spanish, while the other side reads “OY,” a popular Yiddish phrase used in Jewish and American culture. <https://theweitzman.org/oy-yo/>

OY/YO 5 hour installation process in Philadelphia, 2022



“It’s about how two letters can mean so many different things to so many different communities,” artist Deborah Kass said to me as we watched the “Y” get locked into place.

“Deborah Kass’ OY/YO sculpture is a beautiful representation of both the stories we tell inside our museum and the larger story of our nation across the street on Independence Mall,” noted Weitzman curator, Josh Perelman. “It speaks in many languages. It is ‘oy,’ it is ‘yo.’ You can use whatever tonality you want and a new meaning comes.” Street Dept.

Deborah Kass – OY / YO (prints) – 2020



Deborah Kass OY/YO prints 2020

The artwork began as a painting: the word “OY” – and when reflected, it became “YO,” inspiring a second piece. Artist Deborah Kass then translated this wordplay into sculpture. Standing 8 feet tall, 16 feet wide, and 5 feet deep, OY/YO has become part of Old City’s cultural fabric and a destination for tourists and locals alike. There are currently three OY/YO sculptures in the US: the first large-scale version is permanently installed in front of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, a second stands in Philadelphia, and a third is located at Stanford University’s Cantor Arts Center in California.

Story

Our 2022 visit to Philadelphia was a brief stop on a trip to visit colleges with my son. Before arriving, I expected to see sculptures of white men on horses, the Liberty Bell, and other national monuments. But as we drove near Independence Mall on 5th Street, those giant yellow letters came into view and I wanted to hop out of the car. I was completely charmed by the wordplay. I kept thinking of Rocky – “Yo, Adrian!” – and picturing him training on the iconic stone steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. So simple, such a perfect connection to the city. (And apparently “Yo” is part of Philly vernacular, too.)



Walking around to the other side, near the Weitzman, the sculpture clearly reads “OY.” The Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History sits on Independence Mall in Philadelphia. According to its website, its mission is “to present educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore, and celebrate the history of Jews in America... to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire.” Positioned just outside the Weitzman, OY/YO feels like a natural extension of that mission.

Say

- How do you think the color impacts the meaning and approachability of this piece?
- In what ways does this sculpture enforce the public art concept of Community Identity? (Public Art highlights distinct local histories and cultures. Fosters a strong sense of neighborhood pride. Amplifies voices of underrepresented groups.)
- Three foundational American documents were drafted and signed in Philadelphia at Independence Hall: the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Articles of Confederation (1777), and the United States Constitution (1787). Although this sculpture is modern in font, scale and color, how does it support the work of our founders?

Do

- Monumental Cardboard Sculpture: Scale up your favorite local or personal catchphrase using found cardboard. Paint it a vibrant, attention-grabbing color like Kass's signature yellow.
- Make a mini mock up of your catchphrase and collage it into a landscape from a magazine to give it large scale. Take a picture.
- The Interjection Identity Zine: Design a multi-panel zine focusing on vocal interjections (like "Ugh," "Wow," or "Psst"). Use bright, Pop Art colors and bold sans-serif fonts, pairing each phrase with photographs or drawings of different facial expressions or body language.

About the Artist: Deborah Kass



Born 1952 San Antonio, TX
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

Kass is a renowned American multidisciplinary artist. Operating out of Brooklyn, NY, her work explores the intersections of feminism, art history, queer culture, and pop art. Kass is best known for “appropriating” the signature styles of iconic 20th-century male artists to challenge patriarchal narratives in the art world.\

[Gavlak Gallery, Deborahkass.com](#)

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