



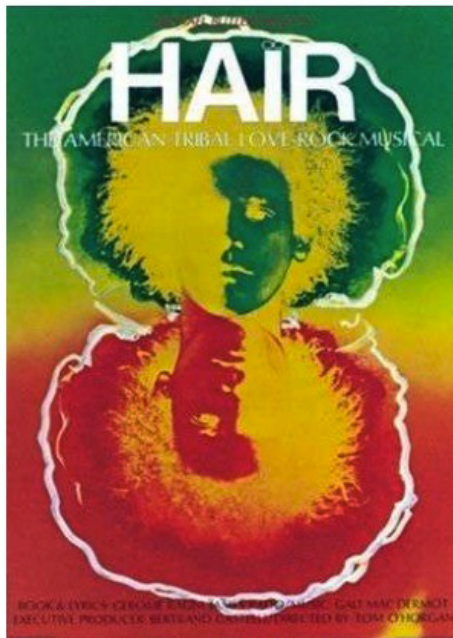
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Deborah Kass at the Andy Warhol Museum: Seeing Through the Mirror of Her Times

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Deborah Kass: Before and Happily Ever After is a major mid-career retrospective of paintings, photographs and sculpture by New York artist Deborah Kass at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, PA. through January 13, 2013. The exhibition features approximately 75 works and showcases Kass' achievements over the course of her three-decade career.



Connecting the dots. Deborah Kass's series of *Feel Good Paintings For Feel Bad Times*, made between 2002-2012, reprise lyrics from popular songs and musical theater to counterpoint real-life politics. In *Let the Sunshine In* (2006), Kass invokes the most hypnotically ritualistic of the songs from the 1968 musical *HAIR* as the good juju to usher in Barack Obama's presidency in 2008. For the author, the painting transported him back to 1968, whence he recalled the dream that Obama realizes for so many of his advocates.

It has been my good fortune to experience the Deborah Kass Effect. I mean that at Kass's present retrospective, *Before and Happily Ever After*, at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, I felt myself liberated from the constraints of time, space and identity. For those who haven't experienced the Deborah Kass effect, suffice that I compare it to the Virginia Woolf Effect--the phasing in and out of time streams and locales, masculine and feminine identities. The difference is that, the Kass Effect isn't achieved in reading a story, but in viewing a painting. If the comparison seems eccentric, consider that Kass is invested in making visual art a process akin to the literary and theatrical experience of entering into the minds and bodies of her subjects with the same disregard for physical boundar-

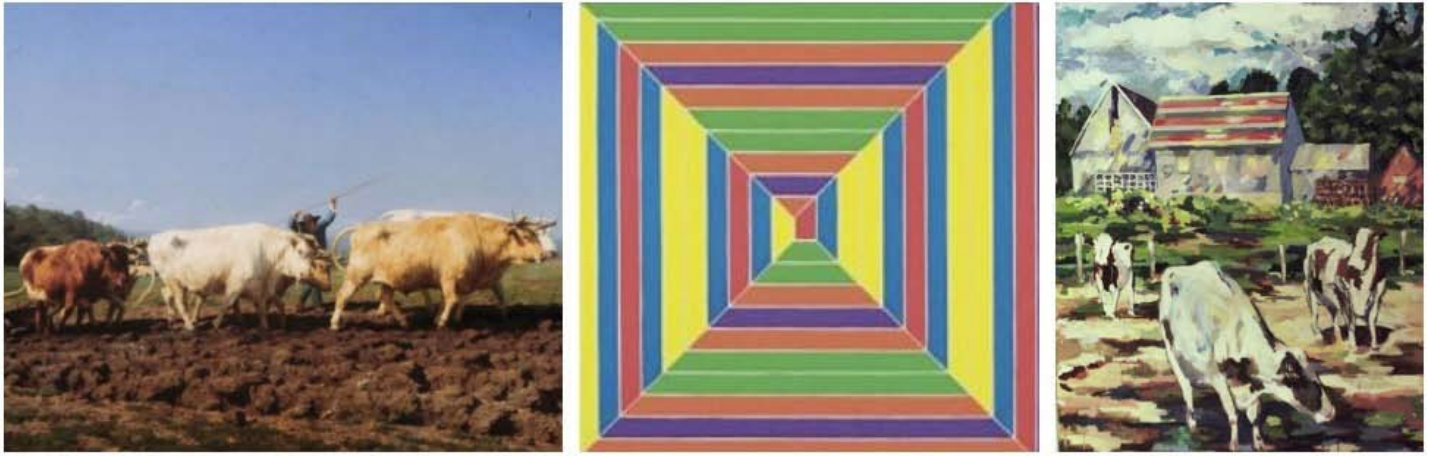
ies that is the facility afforded writers of fictions and histories. Except, of course, that her language is as much the iconography and signage of pictures and paint as it is the written word. Or really, and quite literally, the painted word.

I should here disclose that music also played the role of catalyst in my Warhol Museum epiphany. Not music played in a space for all to hear, but the music that can be summoned to mind by memory and that only is heard subjectively. But then anyone who has enjoyed the Feel Good Paintings For Feel Bad Times that Kass made over the last decade is likely to have walked away from them humming a tune. That happened to me the first time I saw Kass's series in 2007 at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, where the Sylvester song, Do You Want to Funk, lingered in my psyche for far greater time than I wanted it to. But on my visit to the Warhol a week before the 2012 Presidential election, I found myself doing much more than entertaining a harmony.



1968 left its mark on 16-year-old Deborah Kass, to the extent it surfaces in her work 40 years later. The assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. impelled Laura Nyro in 1968 to write *Save the Country*, from which Kass derived inspiration in 2009 for her painting, *Save the Country Now*.

This time the painting and the song that prompted my transport was Let the Sunshine In, the most hypnotically ritualistic of the numbers from the 1968 Broadway musical HAIR. Right there in the museum, albeit quietly under my breath, I began singing the words I've known since I was twelve. And I continued singing them, along with other songs from HAIR, until the conclusion of the 2012 Presidential election assured me of Obama's victory nearly a week later. Kass's painting, my experience of HAIR, and the re-election of Obama had become fused with almost no effort on my part, such was the fluidity of their confluence at the moment. But the gratification of my transfixion came in being reconnected by Kass's painting not just to a dream I had--to a collective dream so many of us had in 1968. I was also transported to a future I felt emboldened to bring into being through the renewed presidency of Barak Obama, the man who since 2008 best represents the dreamed spawned in that decade of optimism.



What do you get when you cross *Plowing in the Nivernais*, 1849, by Rosa Bonheur (a feminist-lesbian, agrarian-19th-century French realist painter) with *Double Mitered Maze*, 1967, by Frank Stella (a macho, presumably straight, modernist, American formalist)? You get Deborah Kass, *Cows*, 1976.

Of course it isn't entirely gratuitous that Kass's *Let the Sunshine In* should have been the key to my re-awakening idealism. The painting and the song it invoked is a mechanism in a chain of associations spanning forty-four years. Like so many of Obama's 2008 supporters, I had become disillusioned with the President. I would have voted a second time for him despite my malaise, but by simply invoking HAIR and its extravagant idealism, Kass's *Let the Sunshine In* impelled me to remember the year in which the idealism of my generation had been knocked out us by the loss of such pragmatic idealists as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Yet here I was looking at a painting that got me humming a tune that would over the next week revive my teenage hippie kid's dream of a new and better world order. Kass had, in a few minutes' encounter with her painting, set me back on the cusp of the Age of Aquarius, something I would have thought impossible only a few minutes before. Such was my memory, that for the next week I reminisced, researched, and wrote primarily about 1968, took pride in tracing how my generation's combined advocacy of civil rights, the anti-war movement, countercultural withdrawal from the commercial mainstream, activism for the ecosystem, and openness to sexual and gender diversity, had gradually led to the election of Barak Obama in 2008. The disillusionment that had steeped inside me between the years 2008-2012 was gone. I now felt invigorated and excited about ratifying the achievement of forty-four years with a vote for another four. However naive I was being meant nothing to me, except that I felt cleared of impediments.



Deborah Kass, *Emissions Control*, 1989-90. Kass's ironic title is reflected in her painting's pictorial organization after early James Rosenquist paintings, which she then lampoons for their optimistic depictions of technocratic civilization. With the left third of the picture alluding to the correlation between male ejaculation and action painting, it's downhill from there as the painting's center erupts with an allusion to nature out of control. At far right, dysfunction reaches tragic proportions in the January 28, 1986 explosion of the Challenger Shuttle after takeoff, which killed seven astronauts. The commission investigating the disaster attributed "NASA's organizational culture and decision-making processes" as "key contributing factors to the accident."

And really, it was more than one painting that had me transfixed. There, in the Andy Warhol Museum, Kass's Feel Good Paintings came to look to me as so many of the signs at an Occupy Wall Street Rally in 2011. In another light, they appeared as the banners of a 1990 Act-Up demonstration; a Gay Pride March in 1979; and others like the Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam banners at rallies I can still recall vividly to this day.

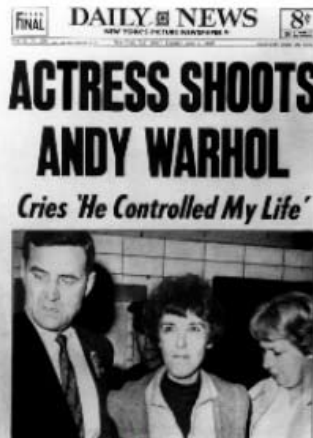
This is what the best art does. It helps us connect the dots of social, cultural, and political meanings that we might not otherwise see on our own. And this is what it means when a museum of the calibre of the Andy Warhol Museum mounts a retrospective of an artist's work such as that by Deborah Kass. It means more than that the intellectual culture of our day no longer eschews an artist who refuses to purge herself of the signage, iconography, and content of populist entertainments, just as she declines to replace those entertainments with a condescension posing as irony and rigorous critique. It means that the signage, iconography and content of art have to be vital to the generation it courts, regardless of the source for its departure. But then we are talking about an institution that honors the life and work of a man who never publicly condescended in his embrace of the mundane and mass-circulated image, the commodity art object, the hype and glitz of celebrity glamor. Warhol never fell prey to the conceits of artistic insularity and elitism that the modern art world has inherited from the centuries when art's sole patronage was the aristocracy. Even after he became the darling of the modern aristocracy--the investor collectors of blue chip art--and pictured them relentlessly, Warhol let the rest of us know that he remained hopelessly devoted to, and inspired by, the popular artists who make pictures and sounds and words for everyone.



Getting the better of the male canon? Jasper Johns, David Salle, Jackson Pollock, Pablo Picasso, and Francis Picabia are all the targets of Deborah Kass's scrutiny ... and admiration. Left to right: Deborah Kass, *Read My Lips*, 1990; David Salle, *Inside His Brain*, 1986; Deborah Kass, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1991.

It's easy to see that Warhol's fixation on celebrities, and the discrete identity politics at work in his iconographic selections, are the reasons that Kass--an artist who would make painting a language of human character--fixated on Warhol so deliberately for a decade (1992-2001). But Warhol Museum director Eric C. Shiner has good reason to mount a show that reaches well beyond Kass's Warhol Project to reference even the student work most museums would eschew. For this long-time Kass enthusiast, there is no better reason for such early inclusions than that we see in her formation the timely events that would instill in a young person the artistic desire to make art that reached beyond formalism and art-for-art's sake tautologies at a time when they were still vital to the reductionist production and discourse of the day, to instead reflect the social and political dynamics raging around her. In short, Kass's art acts as both a calendar and a picture album--a time machine--revisiting American cultural and political history since the 1960s, while highlighting key movements, styles, sensibilities and ideologies in theater, art and politics along her route to the present.

To understand how Kass effects this serialization of our collective past, it helps to know a bit about her. Or at least enough to know that, from the beginning of her development as an artist, Deborah Kass has always done everything wrong. As a girl from the suburbs, she wasn't supposed to harbor a desire to be an artist, yet as a teenager she began in 1968 to bus every Saturday to Manhattan, where she attended classes at the Art Student's League, then after class ran off to Broadway matinees. As a mature artist, she wasn't supposed to exhibit the copies that she made of other artists's work, but she defiantly went about making a career of appropriating and referencing the work of renown artists. Famously feminist and lesbian by 1990, Kass wasn't supposed to celebrate the art of men, yet not only did she let her envy and admiration of great male artists show, she made it the springboard for her activist art aimed at empowering women artists. In being Jewish, she wasn't supposed to talk about being a Jew in mixed company, but not only did she mouth off about it to goys like me, she talked back to the art world about how her Jewishness didn't brand her as some kind of "Other," but rather made her the same as us all in our difference. Most recently, as an artist renown for her critical approach to art, she wasn't supposed to stoop to gleaning her inspiration from--of all things--Broadway musical show tunes. But not only does she "stoop," she gets down to revel in the plebian signage and harmonic hooks of *The Great White Way* and *The American Songbook*, making them the catalysts and signatures of her most compelling, socially relevant and original work to date.



In each other's hair? As if foreseeing Deborah Kass, Andy dons a brunette wig for one of his self-portraits in drag, 1982. Deborah Kass poses for her invitation, *My Andy: A Retrospective*, shown at Jose Freire Fine Art, New York, 1995. *Daily News* front page, June 3, 1968. She may have been unstable and paranoid, but in terms of art market trends, isn't Valerie Solanas right about Andy dominating artist' lives? And now, with her Warhol Museum retrospective behind her, will Deborah Kass once and for all wash Andy Warhol out of her hair? Polaroid of Deborah Kass in blonde wig after Andy Warhol, 1994.

A few examples of Kass's anchoring in recent history are in order. 1968 in particular seems to have left its mark on Kass in terms of her immersion in both popular culture and her introduction to the world of professional art. The simultaneous turmoil and hope, obstructionism and idealism, that characterizes 1968 must have been both daunting and exhilarating to a girl-woman, budding intellectual, just turned sixteen. It's more than biographical interest that compels me to dwell on 1968 for evidence of the issues and social forces that shaped our generation's evolving, politically-acute and self-aware social identities still shaping art today. One of the events of 1968 that cast a shadow over the artworld is the attempt on Andy Warhol's life by Valerie Solanas, the woman who shot him three times for what she imagined was the control he wielded over her. Whatever we attribute to the delusional pathos of Solanas's imagination, and especially to the real discrimination against women in the arts that contributed to her despair, Solanas gave voice to a collective fixation on Warhol that the artworld has still not overcome, in that even from beyond the grave he seems to have a hold over artists in terms of having anticipated the preferred balance of irony to genuine sentiment, the signifiers of popular and high culture, by which artists will modify their work. In this light, it seems unlikely that an assassination attempt on America's premiere artist by an assailant complaining of male domination, whatever her mental state, could be lost on a young woman artist whose ambition and identity would be shaped by many of the same artistic and political lines of thought as those motivating Solanas.



Andy Warhol, *Liz #5 (Early Colored Liz)*, 1963. Right: Deborah Kass, detail of *Double Silver Deb*, 2000. Kass inserts Jewish-lesbian chutzpah into the iconic space imprinted in the fluster of Warhol's Catholic, gay swoon.

For a politically-minded artist such as Kass, 1968 is undoubtedly also formative for being the year that radical feminism grew out of the violent confrontations of students and intellectuals in New York, Berkeley and Paris. Those in Paris in particular can be seen as spawned by an art movement, considering that 1968 is remembered as the year that students sought to realize the remedies for recovering a free life as foreseen by Guy Debord and the artists of The Situationist International. But Kass and other women artists of her generation would also be shaped in 1968 by the media's pursuit of Angela Davis as she rallied for the Black Panthers; by the National Organization of Women as it issued a bill of rights advocating the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; by radical lesbian and Village Voice columnist, Jill Johnston, as she began advocating lesbian separatism as the feminist solution. As for the art scene, women artists such as Martha Rosler, Vija Celmins, Yayoi Kusama, Marisol, Yoko Ono, Elizabeth Murray, Joan Jonas, Joan Snyder and a host of other women artists all disseminated the seeds of Conceptualism in a variety of media. All these talented and empowering women would impact on the young Kass to the extent that the art she made in the subsequent decades would somehow reflect them.

As for Kass's identification with Jewishness, in New York there was no shortage of visionaries that a woman seeking out the company of strong women could look too. Barbara Streisand would be a natural inspiration for a girl issuing from a family of Broadway enthusiasts, especially as 1968 was the year that Streisand won acclaim with her Broadway debut and hit record, *Funny Girl*. Laura Nyro, another prominent Jewish diva, this one for the counterculture, wrote the song *Save the Country* after the assassinations of King and Kennedy, a song that would be the source, conjoined with the art of Ellsworth Kelley, for one of Kass's 2008 banner paintings. In the world of avant-garde art, Eva Hesse was receiving critical acclaim for her pivotal exhibition at Fishbach Gallery, a show that helped to shift the vocabulary of sculpture away from the monumental, industrial and formal production of Minimalism, and toward a personal, gender-specific relationship with human-scaled, hand produced, idiosyncratic objects. 1968 is also the year that Yvonne Rainer issued her now legendary manifesto, "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A," the importance of which extended beyond avant-garde dance in launching a new genre of pedestrian performance art and experimental film that equated gender

and identity as no more than the effects of historically- and culturally-received scripts. And among women painters, Miriam Schapiro, Pat Steir and Joan Snyder were but a few of the Jewish women whose art would inform the experiments of the young Kass.



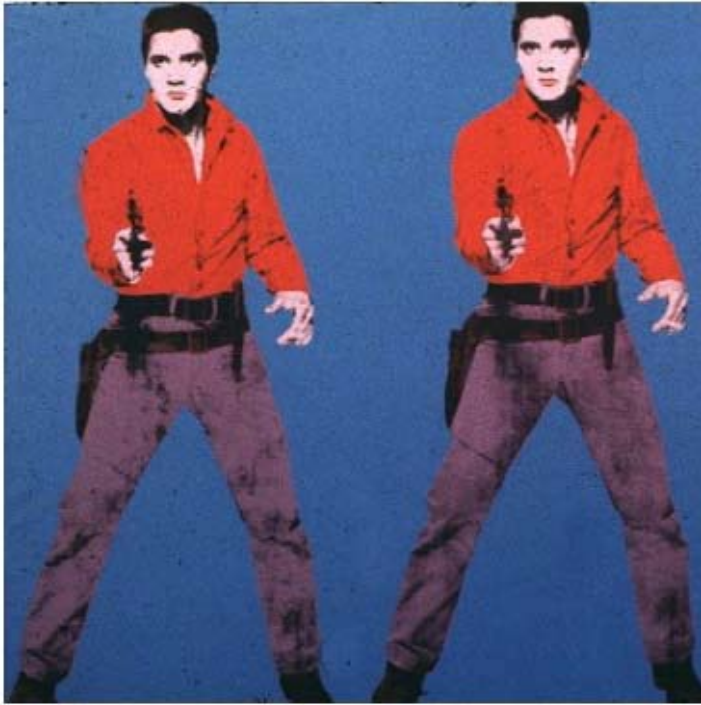
Andy Warhol, *Four Jackies*, 1964.



Deborah Kass, detail of *Four Barbaras (The Jewish Jackie Series)*, 1992.

The Kass time machine makes many stops after 1968. The paintings Kass made in the 1970s invoke Frank Stella and Jasper Johns as protection from the onslaughts of the Conceptualist storms raging against the art establishment throughout the decade, as much as they embody the wish that some of the formidable painting karma of these men would rub off on her. In the 1980s, James Rosenquist and David Salle loom large in Kass's paintings, with Salle in particular cast enviably as both hero and villain, as he was throughout that decade by the art press. By this time Kass borrows the structural and compositional organization of her compositions from Rosenquist and Salle, as well as their iconographic vocabularies and styles, whereas her earlier paintings merely quoted the signage of paintings.

But even as Kass appropriates from male artists, she is recontextualizing their contributions to art history within the larger culture in which they are made. In *Emissions Control*, the action splatter of Jackson Pollock is equated with the ejaculatory hubris that famously hinder men in their reach for sublimated glories. This would be entirely comical if the painting didn't conclude (when reading in the Occidental direction of left to right) with the January 28, 1986 explosion of the Challenger Space Shuttle after takeoff which killed the seven astronauts aboard. The commission investigating the disaster issued the judgment that it identified the "NASA organizational culture and decision-making processes" as "key contributing factors to the accident." Who can read this as anything but the dry yet on-the-mark euphemism for testosterone-heavy hubris? Considering that Kass offsets the disaster with a graffiti boner, she could not have had anything but sexual arrogance and impetuosity in mind as the basis for NASA's dysfunctional "organizational culture."



Andy Warhol, *Elvis 1*, 1963.



Deborah Kass, *Double Yentl Split (My Elvis)*, 1993.

In Kass's paintings from the 1990s, the politics of identity assume the function of an organizing principle. It is the 90s decade, after all, whereby the disregard for essentialist (read fixed) identity became the basis for the surge of identity-activism in 1990s art as spurred on by the writings of Edward Said, Anthony Appiah, Stuart Hall, Gyatri Chakravorty Spivak, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Judith Butler, bell hooks, Eve Sedgwick, Cornel West, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and a host of other cultural, postcolonial, queer and feminist studies advocates deconstructing identity on all its fronts. The 1990s was the decade that the racial, gender and national barriers were finally smashed to the effect that a large proportion of the most vital art made in America was by people of color, women, and those identifying with LGBT sexuality and gender. Of course, the identity movement was greeted with formidable resistance. Can anyone cognizant of American art in the 1990s forget the raging, ranting, response of white critics in *Artforum*, *Art In America*, and *The New York Times* to the identity politics-themed Whitney Biennial of 1993? We certainly remember how wrong these critics were in being unable to foresee the stellar careers and strategies that emerged from "the identity biennial."



What goes into a Deborah Kass *Feel Good Painting*? In Deborah Kass's *Daddy*, 2007, we find one part Jackson Pollock action painting, one part Andy Warhol camouflage print, a lyric from *A Chorus Line*'s "At the Ballet" -- and voila! We have *Daddy I Would Love To Dance*, painted with enamel and acrylic on canvas.

Naturally, the 1990s and its identity politics contextualize Kass's Warhol Project, made between 1992-2001, by enabling Kass to answer Warhol's fixation on the WASPish (or otherwise ethnically ambiguous) white social icons and Hollywood starlets with the premiere Jewish superstar Warhol neglected--the inimitable Barbara Streisand. A decade later, in her series *Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times*, identity politics would embolden Kass further by prompting her to parody the iconography of canonical male painters by offsetting their signature forms with the lyrics and titles of Jewish-American lyricists. In both the Warhol Project and the *Feel Good Paintings*, Kass acts to correct the imbalances that artists, both men and women, either intentionally or unconsciously, legitimized and perpetuated in the ethnic, sexual and gender codes implicit in their modernist work. Iconographies of ethnic identity such as the desired shape of a nose; codes of sexuality such as which media is phallic and which vaginal; and gender orientation such as assuming male action and female ineffectuality as natural predispositions, have all been relayed through art and entertainment as definitively as they have been through religion, science, and traditional education for centuries. But unlike the majority of identity-fixated artists of the last two decades, Kass hasn't taken on the signage and codification of domination and marginality directly. She attacks them on a slant that compels us to turn the work of celebrated artists around and around in our minds so to see their art from relatively different perspective points. Anyone who knows Kass's work is likely to look at a Warhol silkscreen of Marilyn Monroe as just a gay male devotion to divas. We see through Kass's reformulation of a Warhol silkscreen of Jackie Kennedy-Onassis or Elizabeth Taylor what a Jewish lesbian sees obstructing her facility for empathy.

Crashing the gender barrier (or crossing the homosocial divide, as I prefer to call it) is easily Kass's most visible and celebrated accomplishment of the 1990s, and the Warhol Project accomplished much of the heavy lifting. Although on the surface, Kass's Warhol Project appears to be an art of appropriation in the vein of Sherrie Levine and Sturtevant--primarily concerned with appropriating the artistic brands of modernist male icons--Kass's art goes to greater lengths of diversification. The kind that compose individual experience--or locating what I call "The Indivisible Individual Invisible In There"--the core subjectivity that cannot be denied or altered by collective proscriptions and prescriptions. Kass' investment consists of much more than crossing the gender and sexual divide and seizing male codes and signage for women's use. She also imprints her lesbian and Jewish identity onto the appropriated male brand to forge a brand of her own making and temperament. With the new language of homosocial coding and fluid engendering at our disposal, we recognize that Kass illuminates the intricacies of homosocial valuation when she draws attention to more than just the gender and sexual orientation that made Andy Warhol's persona, and made art the star commodity it became.



Deborah Kass, *Frank's Dilemma*, 2009. One of Kass's "Daddy I Would Love To Dance" paintings.

Seizing on Warhol's purposeful, yet stereotypical, queer devotion to, and desire to be like, celebrated women (Marilyn, Jackie, Liza), Kass turns a mirror-image of Warhol's art into a self-portrait by overlaying her own brand of ironic "stereotypes"--which is really to say she intervenes on Warhol with her own take on the mythology of the lesbian mimicry of, and identification with, men and all things male. In this case, it is famous male artists and their signature art brands. The complexity of Kass's psychological and sociological crossing and appropriation of conventional male signage is heightened when she interjects the signage of ethnic stereotypes into the mesh. We see this most effectively in Kass's *My Elvis*, whereby Warhol's worship of Elvis Presley is transposed with her own devotional image of Barbara Streisand in male Yeshiva drag (from Streisand's film *Yentl*). It amounts to Kass inserting Jewish-lesbian chutzpah into the iconic space imprinted in the fluster of Warhol's Catholic, gay swoon. That the beloved objects of both Warhol's and Kass's desires are presumably heterosexual further complicates the gender and sexual codings being unknotted and laid out for all to consider as the widespread and wholly normal, if problematic, phenomena they are.



James Rosenquist, *Marilyn Monroe*, 1963 + Gene Davis, *Sour Ball Beat*, 1964 + Stephen Sondheim's *Company*, 1970 = Deborah Kass, *Being Alive*, 2010.

If Kass weren't taking possession of the male homosocial cultural mythos so unrelentingly, which means she is obliterating the gender prejudice that buttresses the gender divide, I might have said that Kass achieves the dismantling of the artworld divide by becoming a man by definition of assuming the male prerogative to redefine aesthetic and cultural codes in ways proscribed to women just a few decades ago. The achievement, however, is that in seizing the male prerogative, Kass makes such a distinction untenable by stripping--or really diversifying--its gender association beforehand. In its place we see the making of a specific splicing of the new world diversification of gender that so far has no name. Anyone up to the challenge of unwinding it all for the sake of reflection may find that the situation of our present inarticulation on a subject of diverse engenderings will one day be replaced by a lexicon of genders, the way that Inuits have a lexicon for different categories of snow. For now the formula for Kass's assumption of the modernist male's heroic visual art and blockbuster musical lyrics sounds like a bland stand up joke without a punchline: "What do you call a lesbian, crossed with a straight man, crossed with a faggot, crossed with a feminist, crossed with a homophobe, crossed with a motherf..."

The danger today is that it has become too easy to view Deborah Kass's work as an art of middle-class wishes and ambitions. It's true that her art displays the naked ambition for attaining success that snobs attribute to being middle class, but the reality that the desire for success is universal allows us to put to rest the so-called class analysis here. Class analyses have their place in most other modes of production, but the production of art has always thwarted it in the artist's facility for transcending class boundaries with the attainment of patronage, however mixed and prolonged the success.



Amid a sea of protest within a civilization of signs, Deborah Kass's *Feel Good Paintings For Feel Bad Times* seem as much about dissent as about singing out. Three Kass paintings on paper, left to right: *I Am Telling You I'm Not Going*, 2002; *Enough Already*, 2002; *You Never Really Listened to a Woman*, 2002.

But in rejecting standard models of class and capital in our approach to Kass's work doesn't mean that her work is devoid of significations of class and capital. The political nature of her work won't allow such neglect, especially as the issue of class is raised by Kass's crossing over from the signage of art to that of entertainment--conventionally regarded as a aesthetic step downward. In this light, Kass's Feel Good Paintings, with their vibrantly hued song lyrics, take on sharper political edges, even more so in a year of presidential campaigns brimming over with charges of "class warfare." It's fitting that Kass's retrospective opened while the Occupy movement remains memorable for divvying the world into 1 and 99 percents; in a year that the most provocative film released, *The Dark Knight Rises*, was modeled on the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions. (Who can forget the film's scenes of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue lined with the confiscated luxury furnishing and antiques of the 1% who have been dragged from their homes and imprisoned.) But it is only this timing that makes it seem that the ideological and historical implications of class difference dividing high and popular art hover over Kass's Warhol retrospective like a guillotine's blade ready to drop.

Kass' art has always been reflective of the social and political dynamics of the day--as was Warhol's. The difference is that Warhol is thought to have used irony to insinuate a space of ambiguity between his subject and his audience that made viewing his art appear neutral, even when it isn't. Kass replaces Warhol's irony with her own naked envy and desire to succeed. But Kass's example gives us reason to believe that Warhol's motive for dwelling on celebrity wasn't ironic at all--that it was just as envious and desirous a motivation as that of Kass. In this respect, both Kass and Warhol attempt to defer class distinctions by enlarging the collective fantasy of status and privilege through gazing upon and mimicking celebrities. (And so it seems, that Kass's art, like Warhol's, effects an imagined emancipation from class, as well as from time and gender.)



Deborah Kass, more *Feel Good Paintings For Feel Bad Times*, set against the backdrop of the world's pleas and demands. Left to right: *The Nerve*, 2002; *All Men Are Liars*, 2002; *This Is A Man's World*, 2011; *Don't Tell Me to Stop*, 2002.

Of course, the decades separating Warhol and Kass subject them to different cultural restraints and supports. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, formal and aesthetic concerns dominated the artistic discourse in America, making any political implications of Pop Art secondary, if not obfuscated. And I mean even those early Warhols that in their mimicry of market brands draw attention to the commodity culture that allowed marketing and advertising to so insidiously yet commandingly assume the role of shaping world views in the West. Think of it. The role of shaping world views--what had previously been the domain of religion, science, education and government--the role that modern art neglected in its art-for-art's sake rationalization that downplayed or marginalized social concerns--became relegated to advertising, as it remains today.

In this respect, Kass's art diverges from, if not rebels against, Warhol's in reflecting deeper social and political dynamics that define world views through the signage of identity--something that Andy only appears to have intuited, not enlarged on reflectively. Kass also separates from Warhol in not harboring her personal affinities off in a distance remote from her art--a distance interpreted by Warhol's commentators to be a measured irony which he shares with the entire first generation of the formalist-prone Pop artist. Kass's work is amply supplied with it's own sense of irony, just not the irony that Warhol's art possessed--the irony he inherited from Magritte's painting, *The Treachery of Images*, better known by it's depiction of a pipe accompanied by the written phrase, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe.). It is Magritte who is invoked by Warhol's Brillo box sculpture that cannot be mistaken for a Brillo box.

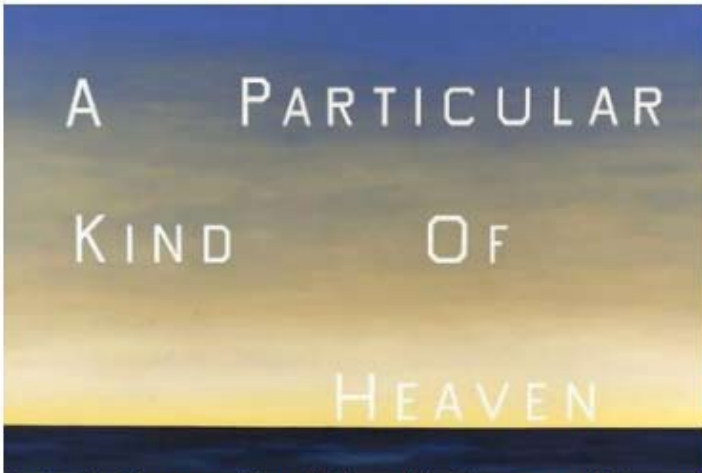


Deborah Kass, left, *Super Freak*, 2008; right: *Do You Wannna Funk With Me*, 2008.

But then Kass never made her art to look as if it were a Warhol replication, just as she more recently hasn't only made references to the art of Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, Jackson Pollock, Kenneth Noland, Bruce Nauman and David Salle, as much as she recalls their mythical predominance in the market and canon of Western Modernism. She didn't have to explain, the way that (Elaine) Sturtevant and Sherrie Levine had to explain, that the work her audience gazed upon was hers, not a Warhol. A few moments alone with her work and some prior acquaintance with Warhol's told us all we needed to recognize the differences. In fact, Kass took the next step after Warhol's media alert, in reacting to, dissenting against, and modeling alternate realities to the insidiously corporate-spun, media-extolled world views that perpetuate and reinforce old social prejudice against individual, ethnic, and cultural differences that have been perpetuated both by avant-garde art and popular entertainment. If Kass has been able to sustain this single-minded project for three decades, it's because

the avant-garde art and popular entertainment is relayed in forms and tropes by which she is personally enthralled. In other words, referencing the surface signage and formalism of historic painters and composers is as captivating to Kass as ironically countering the negations and closures that the pictures and songs by men pose for her as a Jewish woman, lesbian, and artist.

Getting back to the Kass Effect that arrested me in the Warhol Museum and brought me back into 2012 with an exuberant sense of the evolution that we progressives have made since 1968: No doubt I would have eventually reflected on the last four decades philosophically without Kass's help, but would I have alighted on the present with the same bouyancy? It makes all the difference that musical theater is Kass's catalyst in her current work--and through her, our catalyst. What is more rousing and optimistic than musical theater, its critics be damned? No doubt everyone has his and her own favorite from the Kass songbook to launch such a reverie through time. But as mine, through Kass's prompting, turned out to be from HAIR, politics and identity would inevitably guide my time travel. Kass herself has recounted that she made her 2006 painting, *Let The Sunshine In*, to ward off the bad political juju of the Cheney and Bush years clouding the emerging Obama-McCain candidacies. I didn't know this was her intent when I was at the Warhol Museum. That she should somehow convey this concern to me through a painting on the cusp of yet another Presidential race is one of those gratuitous confluences that can only seem auspicious. For anyone who has seen HAIR, especially in its early years of political relevance, knows that the experience of art conjoined with musical theater, conjoined with the deep draw of identification with race and sexuality, unleashed a ritualistic power that is rarely experienced outside religion in a modern world. The closest we come today are the dance clubs and sex clubs, but those are largely bereft of the spiritual sustenance that HAIR's creators managed to invoke through the synchronicity of its audience's requirement for political catharsis from war and assassinations and the simultaneous cravings for a higher connection among the exploding youth movement of the 1960s.



Deborah Kass considered alongside the memorable word painters of the century. Sonia Delaunay-Terk, detail from *Electric Prisms*, 1914; René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1928; Ed Ruscha, *A Particular Kind of Heaven*, 1983; Deborah Kass, *If I Only Had the Nerve*, 2002.

For the most part, the thin artery of fluidity between the art world and the Broadway theater that Kass longed for had been all but permanently clamped shut--with its most significant exception being the tribal love-rock musical HAIR. Only HAIR had roots in the history of art that can match its roots in musical theater. One example stands out. In the song and dance number, White Boys/Black Boys, a trio of black girls wearing platinum-blonde wigs sing of their desire for white boys, while a trio of white girls wearing blackest Afro wigs sing of how sexy black boys are. In the number's finale, all six sing in unison of the glory of "Mixed Media," a typically cool 1960s euphemism for interracial sex as the quick and hedonistic fix to racial conflict. It's this kind of reference borrowed from the avant-garde in their quest for boundary-deliqesence since the days of Dada that would carry through from HAIR into Kass's art, even if critics discovering her work for the first time largely perceived the inheritance to be coming from Warhol and other 1960s art luminaries. Certainly the art of identity politics made in the United States by artists of color, transgender, and poly-sexuality, and to which Kass was a vital contributor, can be instantly summoned to mind as directly influenced by such 1960s dreams of rainbow cohabitation. The dream of the counterculture may have had a more collective character--more "communal," in the parlance of the day--than the more rigorous and theory-laden identity-activist art realized in the 1990s. But by and large, the social iconography and the artistic styles that artists such as Kass invoked throughout the 1990s converted the physical features of identity--those of sexuality, gender, ethnicity, race, even ideology--into a kind-of-conceptual media to be redefined, reshaped, redistributed, and remixed by artists at will. And, arguably, just as HAIR's lyrical creators, James Rado and Gerome Ragni, had precognated it.

Of course, HAIR was itself a hybrid descendant of the 1960s Happenings, Street Theater, love-ins, be-ins, smoke-ins, and protest marches. The stage set of HAIR is perpetually littered with the signs and banners that protestors carry, and which especially the drawings for Kass's Feel Good Paintings resemble. As for the 1968 poster and album cover, anyone can see that the design is a riff off of Andy Warhol's silkscreen prints, while the performances onstage sometimes resembled what we know of the tradition-mocking Dada performances of 1914-17, or in the 1990s resembled the ACT-UP protest, which were so ocularly-endowed with the poster art of Gran Fury. We should also remember that HAIR features one of Broadway's (one of mainstream theater's!) first openly-queer characters singing sweetly and proudly of the pleasures of sodomy while expressing bafflement at its defilement by society--along with such other sacred things as fellatio, cunnilingus, and pederasty--a full year (two years counting it's Public Theater run in 1967) before the Stonewall Nation was born from the erupting riot on New York's Sheridan Square.



Art and Broadway rarely mix. Among the few and notable times that the concerns of art and artists have descended on The Great White Way are, (clockwise), *HAIR*, the rock musical by James Rado, Gerome Ragni and Galt Macdermott that startled and exhilarated audiences with its irreverent anti-establishment dissent styled after Dada, Happenings, Performance Art, and even suggested Mixed Media could be the solution to race relations in America. Stephen Sondheim had a hit with *Saturday In the Park With George*, George being Georges Seurat, the 19th-century Impressionist inventor of Pointillism. In Yazmina Reza's darkly comic *Art*, the long-time friendship of three professional men deconstructs over a white-on-white painting upon which they cannot come to an amicable consensus. *Red* is John Logan's brave play about the Abstract-expressionist Mark Rothko (seen here played by Alfred Molina), who lives and rages his existentialist belief that "there is tragedy in every brush stroke."

Perhaps most importantly for the 16-year-old Kass of 1968, HAIR, along with the real counterculture it emulated, rejected the artificial class and economic distinctions that motivated and perpetuated the centuries-old conceit that an irreparable breach of quality separates the elite masterpiece from the popular hit and the aesthetic sensibilities each fosters. At a time when the art world had buried its political ideologies in the esoteric yet insular and ineffectual aesthetics of Minimalist Art, the political force of a theatrical spectacle that substantively de-mystified ethnic, racial, gender, and religious identity to expose the hypocrisy of prevailing power politics around the world could do no less than leave its indelible mark on the post-adolescent generation of the day. This is more than indulgence in reflections of the way life used to be. This is the forward thrust of the very generation that ushered Barak Obama to his first and second terms in office.

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